





THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE



Great Writers



Great Writers

CERVANTES

SCOTT

MILTON

VIRGIL

MONTAIGNE

SHAKSPERE



GEORGE EDWARD WOODBERRY

NEW YORK
THE McCLURE COMPANY
MCMVII

PN571
1843

Copyright, 1907, by
THE McCLURE COMPANY
Published, October, 1907



CONTENTS

	PAGE
CERVANTES	3
SCOTT	39
MILTON	75
VIRGIL	111
MONTAIGNE	149
SHAKSPERE	183

818490

APR 29 '55



Great Writers

I



CERVANTES

Cervantes, noble by blood, was born poor. An infancy at Alcalá de Henares, boyhood at Valladolid, youth at Madrid; from such early years he emerges into the half lights of biography in the two worlds of arms and letters. He was certainly the poet of his school, for his master praised and printed the verse of his "dear and beloved pupil;" and why should we not believe he was that same Miguel de Cervantes, page at court, who for ruffling there in an affair of gallantry was condemned to ten years' exile and to have his right hand cut off, and escaped to hiding? 'Tis as easy as deer-stealing. But whether as a cavalier in flight, or as a protégé more peacefully picked up, Cervantes left Madrid at twenty-one in the train of the Papal Ambassador, Monsignor Acquaviva, a fortunate Italian youth two years his senior and a patron of art and letters; and, as a gentleman in attendance upon him, travelled to Rome.

GREAT WRITERS

There in a city which was still the world's high capital the young Spanish provincial, half poet, half gallant, came into touch with life in the large. He learned Italian, then the master tongue of literature; in the palace he mingled with the most cultivated society of the world and heard much high-bred discussion; he came to recognize that something barbarous and belated which foreign nations found in the literature of his own land. Cervantes had a soul capable of great enthusiasms. At Rome, in 1570, a great cause was in the air. It was one of the oldest of great causes. "A Crusade! A Crusade!" was the cry. The Turks were storming Cyprus; they threatened Venice; they filled the African coast; they held the sea. Was the Mediterranean to be a Turkish lake? It appealed to Cervantes because it was a Christian cause, and he was of the "old Christian blood" that for centuries had waged the duel with the Moors, to whom the Turks were heirs. It appealed to him because it belonged to the glory of Spain, with her vice-royalties strewn in Italy and on the islands, to crush the infidel. And it appealed to him because he was young. Don John of Austria, whose figure stood out in Southern Catholic chivalry with a brilliancy of knight-hood not unlike Sidney's in the Puritan North, in its power to awake the imagination of the generous and the jealousies of the cold and mean, was the leader of the

CERVANTES

cause. Cervantes's choice was a foregone conclusion. If by the spirit he was a writer, by the flesh he was a soldier. In that adventurous age a Spaniard, though a genius, was born for roving and for arms. When his young patron, Acquaviva, following the pleasant Italian way, put on the Cardinal's hat at twenty-four, Cervantes left the ante-chamber and enlisted in the Spanish ranks.

A year later, the sun of Lepanto breaking, October 7, 1571, the young recruit, sick and weak with fever, lay below on the galleon, "Marquesas." At noon, the fight being on, he pleaded his duty against the remonstrances of his comrades, came on deck, and was stationed by the long boat in command of twelve men. At night, the fight over, he lay there with two gun-shot wounds in the breast and his left hand shattered. It was a fruitless victory, men say to-day; then it was the greatest sea-fight of the world. To Cervantes it remained his "one crowded hour of glorious life." Five years he was in these wars, in barracks and on campaigns. He served at Navarino, Corfu, Tunis, Sardinia, Sicily, and in Italy — one fair last year at Naples. Don John himself and the Sicilian viceroy bore testimony to his good conduct. He sailed for home, was captured, taken to Algiers, and fell to the spoils of a Greek renegade as a Christian slave. Five years more he was in these bonds. Once he was sold to

GREAT WRITERS

the Dey, Hassan, for five hundred ducats, an interesting fact, the price of a world-genius as a slave not being often quoted.

His character now shone conspicuous. Two things marked him out among thousands. He was first in the eyes of the captives — to plan, to encourage and to undertake. He was the central plotter of daring escapes for himself and his comrades, by twos and threes, and by scores, by land and by sea. He even dreamed of a general rising and a Spanish rescue of all the sufferers. Hassan said, "could he preserve himself against the maimed Spaniard, he would hold safe his Christians, his ships and his city." He was first also in the respect of his masters. Repeatedly detected, he refused to abandon his attempts; often threatened and with the noose about his neck, in the full peril of such atrocities as he frequently saw inflicted, with unbroken constancy he shielded others and took all danger on himself. Yet he was never once struck. A certain readiness of jesting speech — helped perhaps, like Lamb's, by his stammer — seems to have served him at such times. His security, nevertheless, is inexplicable. A wilder tale than this of his captivity one does not read in books of reality. He was already on board ship for transportation to Constantinople, when the long efforts of his good mother, together with the aid of a subscription in Algiers among the mer-

CERVANTES

chants by the hands of a Redemptionist Father, bought his freedom. So the decamping court page of twenty came back to Spain at thirty-three, a crippled soldier and a ransomed slave.

He became a king's officer, a commissary to collect stores for naval adventures, like that great one of the Armada, and a tax-gatherer. He got embarrassed with courts and officers, a trusted agent defaulted, and he was more than once in prison. He had married a wife, Dona Catalina, not a fortune, but she brought him — here opens the domestic interior — besides some vineyards, “two linen sheets, one good blanket and one worn, tables, chairs, a brazier, a grater, several sacred images, one cock, and forty-five pullets.” His house was the general refuge of the women of the family; there, in 1605, were living his wife, his natural daughter, two sisters, and a niece; the women took in needlework, and Cervantes himself by that time had become apparently a general business agent and made out papers for customers who called on him.

The jail, the tax collectorship, the long-suffering poverty — are they not the familiar marks of that other profession, the career of letters? “Pen never blunted lance, nor lance the pen,” he said; one failing, he took the other. Strong by nature, he cared for success, and with good sense he sought it in the beaten track. He obeyed

GREAT WRITERS

occasions, he followed the fashion and the market, he tried all kinds. It was the age of artificial sentiment; and he wrote a shepherd book, like Sidney's "Arcadia," a tangle of intrigue, rhetoric and love-plaining verse. It was the age of the rising drama; and he tried the play, staging realistic scenes from his life in Algiers. It was the age of the European short story; and he tried the tale, creating that variety of it which springs from direct observation of manners. Twenty years of such labours, a range from the finished whimsies of fashionable courtly fancy to the hard realism of the thieves' market, and he had not yet succeeded; but his mind comprised the theatre of life, and he was trained in all the modes of literary art. "Don Quixote," when it appeared in his fifty-eighth year, was the book of a wise old man. Its popular success did not bring him friends or money. Ten years later the second part was issued.

The grave old man, on the verge of seventy, was near his end; a figure of medium height, an oval face, with chestnut hair, a Roman nose, vivid complexion, and "the silvery beard that twenty years ago was golden" — so he describes himself. Though he mingled much with men all his life, he appears in the retrospect singularly solitary. Not bred in the university, he had never been accepted by those of the schools; he had led an independent career, frank of speech, careless of enmity, aloof

CERVANTES

from every clique, acquainted with the strength and weakness of all, soberly judging even his young rival, Lope de Vega, the darling of the age. No one who saw him moving with the stooped shoulders and the slow gait, thought how future ages would have prized some living portrait of that face, nor guessed that this stammerer was the world-voice of Spain; none of the religious brotherhood he joined to secure his funeral rites, as they followed him "with his face uncovered," a little unnoticed company, knew that the greatest Spaniard was there consigned to an obscure and now forgotten grave.

Cervantes himself could not have foreknown the nature of his fame. He did not perceive the relative importance of "Don Quixote" among his works. Not recognizing that he had broken out the modern path, he went back to the old ways. He again sought the honours of the poet in his "Journey to Parnassus." He fell in with the opinion of his friends that his "Persiles and Sigismunda" would reach "the extreme of possible goodness," and be "the best composed in our language, of books of entertainment;" he died still projecting a sequel to his first pastoral romance, "Galatea." He was in no haste to take up and finish the second part of "Don Quixote." Literature was in those days, by the standard of taste and in tradition, a thing of refinement, elevation, style, in matter noble, in manner convention-

GREAT WRITERS

al; and the conscious ambition of Cervantes clung to this dying classicism for true reputation. "Don Quixote" was never planned to be a great book. It was "engendered in a prison," perhaps a by-thought of his mind, as a parody of the romances of chivalry. Cervantes was apt to have a purpose in his writings. In his realistic plays he meant to bring home to men's bosoms that cause of the freeing of Algiers which was his only practical dream in life and lingered long; in his novels he professed that they were exemplary or moral tales; and in "Don Quixote" he declared that his only aim was to destroy the popular chivalric romance which he looked on as a false and harmful mode of fiction. In his first sketch he found it, perhaps, vulgar in matter and barren in topic, too slight a theme to bear his genius; he tried to heighten it by introducing independent tales either wholly foreign or loosely connected, and episodes of gallantry more closely yet carelessly interwoven with the main plot. The book grew under his hand, and almost changed its nature in the second part, where there is nothing extraneous; it displayed a depth of type and a reach of discourse equal to the power of any genius for creation or reflection, and gathered to itself with infinite variety the universal significance of life. Though Cervantes grew conscious of its intimacy with his own spirit, it is only on the last page that he declares the identity of

CERVANTES

the work with himself. He had gradually put into it, substantially, all he was — all he had seen, all he knew — without being aware of what he had done till it was done; and, like Columbus, he was never fully aware of what he had done. “Don Quixote” announced a new age.

Cervantes was not in advance of his age. A great book greatens with time; and the seed-vessels which it contains Time rifles, and scatters its germinal forces throughout the world and ripens them in the bosom of a broad humanity; but the vitality of these belongs to the human spirit and is a thing apart from the individuality of the original author. Men have found in Cervantes a reformer, a free-thinker, a censor of Church and State, a modern pessimist — all the vexed brood of restless spirits of the latter days. He was none of these. He was a man of his country and age, and accepted the world as it was about him. He observed its elements, its operations — summed the general result of life; but he had no thought of changing what was. The idea of change, the revolutionary idea, was out of his ken. Cervantes was part and parcel of the present, whole with his time; a loyal subject, a true Catholic. He approved of the expulsion of the Moors. He had a liberal outlook on the foreign world, shown especially by his fair words for England, Spain’s foe; and at home he saw the political and

GREAT WRITERS

even the ecclesiastical organization as human institutions subject to defect in persons, means and all their temporalities; if divinely instituted, they were humanly constituted. Institutional life he saw in its right proportions as a part of fixed mortal routine, belonging essentially in the material sphere — the body politic, the body ecclesiastic. He was concerned with life in other phases. He was a natural critic; judgment was one of his principal gifts, shown not only in minor literary notices that stud the way, but in the large in those discourses which richly interweave the narrative or arise out of the dialogue, turning eloquently to monologue under the flame of thought; and in the creative parts he was a critic of life. He was a great critic of life just because he had no ulterior aim either reformatory or humanitarian. Not the practical modification of life, not life in the prospect, but its imaginative contemplation, life in the retrospect, was his sphere. It is an old man's book. To him life was externally a spectacle, and in himself a function; as a function it had been a gradually disillusioning enthusiasm; as a spectacle it had become an increasing irony. An enthusiastic youth is apt to be followed by an ironical old age. In the South, especially, young passion begot these pleasant ironies of later years, and the Mediterranean literature, except in the greatest, is well divided between young passion and old irony, whose

CERVANTES

blend in "Don Quixote" attains to greatness. Its chance "engendering in a prison" is in itself ironical; its destiny to enthrall the world is the very fatalism of the grotesque in life. A madman and a fool, a horse and ass, seeking adventures in a world as it is, go faring forth on the great empty Spanish plains: what mortal interest can there be in their doings or their fate?

"Don Quixote" is the book of Spain. Its theatre is the Spanish land. It is a book of the open air and the broad world. It has for landscape the burning plains, the desolate romantic mountains, the strip of blue by the coast; its outlook is along the Mediterranean world by the highway of the islands that Cervantes had travelled in youth, whence men came back with tales of sea-fight and captivity; on the long Northern edge lay Protestantism like a high mountain range, and its over-sea horizons stretched away to Peru and the Indies. It is a book written in Spain as from the centre of the world, and this Spain was filled with its own folk; the race-mark of "the old Christian blood," of dark-skinned Moor and gipsy was stamped on them; they came forth in all their variety of life, hidalgo, bourgeoisie, picaresque, ducal, provincial, intellectual, young and old, good and bad, soldier, student, and priest, innkeepers, criminals, players, peasants, lovers, highwaymen, barbers, carriers, judges, officials, doctors, menagerie-men, dam-

GREAT WRITERS

sels, duennas — an endless list. Scarce any book has so many people in it. This mass is put in constant movement which gives unwearied liveliness to the scene. It is a book of life on the road. All the world is *en voyage*. The galley slaves are there; even the dead are going a journey. The delineation of manners is on the national scale. Only the high dignitaries of Church and State are exempt from the general conscription. The Court and the great ecclesiastics are not seen, but their absence only proves how small a part exalted officials have in constituting the character of a people. The Spanish folk is represented in its racial life without them, and the portrayal is nationally complete. Cervantes deals with this multitude easily, taking them individually and a few at a time. It is a book of short flights, of incidents lightly dovetailed, of scenes strung together, of combinations rapidly formed and dissolved. The characters are seized like Holbein's in the "Dance of Death," only here the dramatic moments are as various as the manifold situations of the living range of human affairs; the pictures and groupings are nevertheless on a similar limited scale, momentary and shifting, and each person is characterized with his own habit of life, caught in his own world, and shown completely in a few strokes. How many such small scenes crowd to the memory! The muleteer trolling the snatch of Roncesvalles in the dark

CERVANTES

morning of El Toboso; the student singing on his way to the wars, the puppet-show, the lion, and in low life, the disasters of the night at the inn; innumerable vivid sketches! Thus the book is, by its surface, representative of all Spain, of the look of the land, the figures of the people, the daily event and business of life. But it exceeds the mere flat pictorial method. It is more richly bodied forth.

About all this panorama there is what gives wholeness to life. There is a world-perspective of the larger present, that secular environment of contemporaneity found in Shakspeare's plays, and here signified by means of the continuous inroad of the Turkish power into the story. There is a historical background, most clearly reflected in the popular knowledge of chivalric romance, and in the fact that every one knows of chivalry and each character, no matter how humble, takes up a natural and instantaneous attitude towards Don Quixote almost as if he were an expected guest. The blend of ballad history with this romance helps the effect. This whole Spanish folk inhabits knightly ground, and preserves its tradition and sentiment. There is also an emotional *fond*, a part of national character, interpreted here by the incessant gallantry of love in operatic episodes, by the shepherds, the serenades, the runaways, the youthfulness of love, its sentimental sufferings, the folly of its escapades,

all its charms and senselessness. And there are in the Spanish nature of the book qualities more abstractly felt — intrigue and trick, ceremonial, grandiloquence, boasting, gullibility, mendacity, coarseness, cruelty — human qualities all, but here with their Spanish physiognomy. “Don Quixote,” even in its national aspects, is a book that has all the dimensions of life, personal, geographical, historical, emotional, moral. It sweats Spain as an olive does oil.

But all this is only the environment of the action and the means of its operation in the tale. Cervantes knew a more admirable way of setting forth the soul of Spain. It is not merely because Don Quixote and Sancho are always on the scene that they surpass the other characters in power of interest; they have a higher life. Cervantes stamped the genius of the race by a double die, on the loftier and the humbler side; noble and peasant, the mad hidalgo and the deluded boor, divide between them the spiritual realm of Spain. The illusion of the one, the duping of the other only intensify their racial traits and perfect them. Character is deeper than circumstance, and owns a superiority over all the world of appearances. If Don Quixote is at first interesting for what happens to him as is the way of life, he becomes of interest for what he is; and the same, though in an inferior degree, is true of Sancho. Don Quixote

CERVANTES

achieves his ideal in his soul, however badly he fares with fortune in the outer world. He is complete in true knighthood, and when his madness leaves him it cannot take away the nobility of nature which it has brought the poor gentleman whom it found nameless and unoccupied on his little estate and made one of the world's heroes. The vocabulary of moral praise cannot exhaust his virtues. He is brave, resolute, courteous, wise, kind, gentle, patient; and, not to continue the enumeration, he possesses these traits with a distinctive Spanish excellence. What tenacity there is in his resolution, what recklessness in his courage, what fatalistic sweetness in his resignation, what endurance in a land of lost causes, what sadness of defeat accepted in the quiet of adversity! If these are not the most obvious, they are perhaps the deepest Spanish traits in the noble natures of that birth and soil. In Sancho, faithful, affectionate, dubious, nationality has lower relief, since he shares more simply the universal peasant nature of the South, but he is as abundantly Spanish in his peasantry as Don Quixote in his sublimated chivalry. Both were fooled to the top of their bent; but destiny did not mistake her way; by comedy she perfected them, each in his own kind. It does not matter what happens to the battered body of Don Quixote any more than to his crazy armour; in him the soul's the thing, and Cervantes keeps his soul invulner-

GREAT WRITERS

able and undishonoured. The dignity of the virtue of the great qualities of the Spanish ideal is preserved as well as set forth, and is seconded by the humbler virtue of the life near to the soil. No nation has cast ideal types of itself more summary, exemplary and real.

Later ages have seen in Don Quixote a typifying power even more profound, and far beyond the reach of Cervantes to know, as no one can know the depths of his own personality. Don Quixote was a man of the past, bringing outworn arms against a changed world. Spain is a backward nation, ill-furnished for modern times. Other lands have persisted in seeing in Spain the Don Quixote of nations, whose life was a dream of past glory, whose thoughts and appliances were antiquated, whose career in the modern world must be foredoomed. So they saw her set forth lately in full tilt in the lists against the best equipped, the most modern, the youngest of the nations of the earth. But what unconscious penetration there was in that man's genius, what depth of truth, whose embodiment of the Spanish ideal has become the synonym of his country's fate!

As the book of Spain, in the external and to some extent in the internal sense, "Don Quixote" was fed from the active life of Cervantes in his goings up and down in the country as a tax-gatherer and his journeys as a young soldier on the sea. He had, however, another and

CERVANTES

perhaps more engaging life in the world of books. He was as full of ideas as of experience. He was a scholar; and using this side of his nature he made his work as expressive of the literary power of Spain as it was representative of her active genius. "Don Quixote" was literary in its origin, a crusade by parody against a particular kind of literature; and, besides, the hero became a knight-errant through the reading of books, and he retained on his adventures that interest in literature of all kinds which makes the book as much one of letters as of arms. All varieties of literature used in Spain are to be found in it either in examples or by allusion and criticism, and not only those of native growth but some of foreign extraction, Italian and Arabic. The chronicle, the romance, the pastoral are everywhere present; verse in many forms, comic and serious; the tale of the Boccaccio type, and the realistic tale; the old Renaissance debate between arms and letters, and those discourses which are little highly finished essays of a not unlike sort; drama and poetry are also present in elaborate examination of their theory and practice, and the whole question of diction both by example and precept; and there is much specific criticism of authors and books. The ballad and the proverb, characteristically Spanish kinds, underlie the book, and the style includes all the scale from the homeliest and coarsest to the most artifi-

GREAT WRITERS

cial, ornate and resonant known to fancy and conceit. Cervantes's interest in all these forms, methods and questions is of the liveliest. Literature was in an unsettled state, a period of experiment, change and learning. He was himself two-natured. On the one hand he was breaking out new ways by sheer impulse, coming near to life in his plays, nearer in his novels, nearest of all in "Don Quixote," and using plain prose with perfection for directness, vividness and truth; on the other hand he was charmed by the academic traditions of the Renaissance in topic, sentiment, imaginative method, language, poetry, and in the greater part of his writings emulated it. His entire works exhibit the whole range of literature in his time; "Don Quixote" shows it substantially, in epitome.

"Don Quixote" thus comes to have one of the high distinguishing traits of literary greatness; it is one of those remarkable books which are watersheds of literature. It looks before and after. Toward the past it slopes back on the forests of chivalry and the glades and hills of the pastoral, and it is clothed with the power of poetry in one or another mode of its various magic; and it rolls on to the land of the future in its realism, its humour, its direct contact with life as it is, its recognition of the popular lot, of common-sense, of positive things, and here it is clothed with the power of prose in one or another

CERVANTES

mode of its modern efficiency. Cervantes could not know this; his conscious ambition, unable to emancipate itself from the bonds of the long-loved and still glorious tradition, harked back to the ways of the past, but his genius always struck out for the future with the instinct of a wild creature that has mysterious knowledge of its own paths; his genius struck for realism, for humour, for prose, out toward the modern world. The poetic irony of chivalry had been attempted in the old way and successfully accomplished by Ariosto, and other Italians, and their work ended an age; they belong to the Renaissance past. The solvent which Cervantes applied to chivalry was another irony, the irony of the living and actual world, the irony of prose; hence "Don Quixote" is said to begin modern literature, and the greatest of our Northern novelists, Fielding, Scott, Victor Hugo, to name no others, have taken alms of Cervantes's genius.

Notwithstanding the brilliancy of the exploit — Cervantes, like Columbus, finding the new world that men of another race and nations of a later destiny were to possess — the Spanish literary genius in "Don Quixote" is mainly reminiscent. Though the modern child was born, it lay in an antique cradle, in an environment of the past. Cervantes loved the old romances which he destroyed as Plato loved the poets whom he exiled. He had a soul that felt the swell of great enterprises; he

knew the spell of the lonely deed of high emprise appealing to individual prowess, the call of the adventure reserved for the destined knight. Who doubts that in that passage where, the priest speaking of Turkish troubles, Don Quixote makes his dark suggestion, Cervantes is smiling at his own heart? "Were they alive now," says Don Quixote " (in an evil hour for me — I will not speak of any else) the famous Don Belianis or some one of those of the innumerable progeny of Amadis of Gaul! If any of them were living to-day, and were to confront the Turk, i' faith, I could not answer for the consequences. God understands me, and I say no more." This had been Cervantes's dream — the freeing of Algiers; and had Philip given him a fleet, doubtless he could have done it; but Philip had other thoughts, and Cervantes shrugged his old shoulders, and smiled at his self-confidence of earlier days. Cervantes loved the pastoral, too, and the serenade and all the dear old-fashioned pleasures, the guitar and the high-sounding words; though set in a humorous situation the eloquent discourse of Don Quixote on the golden age gives the true note of the literary heart. Cervantes was pouring himself into his book, and all these loves went along with him — a poet's, a scholar's, a lover's, as well as a humourist's loves. He was no young novice, without a past and life-affections of the mind; the wine ripening in his tem-

CERVANTES

perament was mellowed from the stock of the world's old books. If he had clothed Don Quixote with some shadows of Amadis, he knew that Sancho, too, had his literary ancestry in Italy and remote Provence. Spain was not only a body of contemporary manners and events; it had a soul of poets dead and gone, a various and rich literary tradition, gathered and exemplified in these flowing pages. "Don Quixote" is a book of arms and the active life, but it is also a book of letters and the scholarly life; either alone had been but half the man; together, body and soul, they make up the world's most wonderful national book in prose — the one that is all Spain.

"Don Quixote" was welcomed by foreign nations, but not altogether as a foreigner. It is a European book. Cervantes, besides what the genius of his race and country gave him, received a gift from destiny. He embodied a great moment of time, the passing-hour of the old European ideal. It was a living ideal, that of chivalry. It was sprung from real conditions, and greatly ruled the minds and somewhat the lives of men through a long era. It belonged to a world of social disorder, the thinly populated, scarce reclaimed wilderness of feudal Europe; it belonged, too, to a world of marvel, where the unknown even in geography was a large constituent element, and magic, superstition and devildom were so rife

as to be almost parts of the human mind; but such as it found the world, there this ideal moved with power. The military spirit never took form more nobly than in this chivalric type. It combined and reconciled two of the greatest motive powers in the human spirit; the idea of sacrifice and the force of self-assertive personality. The perfect knight would die for his faith, his loyalty and his love, but he died in battle. The reality of this ideal is shown by the depth, the richness and the long continuance of its appeal to the bosoms of men. The idea of rescue, generated from mediæval misery and helplessness in an environment of brutal physical force, is its ethical core; but its efflorescence in the imagination of men was as many-coloured as a sun. Beginning in the British waste marshes and the Frankish Court, it annexed the farthest Orient to the forests, deserts and seas of its adventures; it re-made the genealogies of history and drew all the great, emperors and saints alike, into the lives of its parentage; it absorbed into its own tradition all past heroic excellence. It developed a ceremonial ritual; it gathered to itself the mighty power of symbolism in its most august and passionate forms; it gave forth a great legendary literature, one of the richest products of human effort and faith, written in every European tongue and splendid with the deeds of every soil. In the fulness of time, Arthur and Roland receding,

CERVANTES

it was Amadis who was the star of chivalry. Amadis's tale, though now out of the way, was once the book of Europe. It had a spell to hold the finest spirits, like Sidney's, and appealed to them directly and intimately as the mirror of their hearts and hopes. It contained the European mood of knighthood in its last beauty before its near eclipse and sudden dimming. Cervantes loved and honoured it, and its hero was Don Quixote's ideal man, as he had been of thousands of the dying cult. Such was the nature of the literature which Cervantes "smiled away." For that had happened to the burning faith of chivalry which is the fate of all the gods; at first men are overawed by them and worship, then they lift equal eyes to them and find them companions of life; and last they laugh at them. The laughter of men at chivalry had already filled the world from the lips of Italy before Cervantes came. In his day chivalry was dead and buried. The madness of Don Quixote was but its ghost, wandering in the staring daylight of a new age, forlorn, ridiculous, without place or use in the world.

The pastoral, which was a later growth, was complementary to the chivalric romance, and by its means feminine elements entered into the simple manhood of the knightly type and softened its humanity. Its affiliations were Renaissance, as those of chivalry were mediæval, and it appropriated easily the grace, the sentiment and

the emotional luxury of the reborn classic ideal. It survived the true chivalric mood, and lingered; in "Don Quixote" it is not less omnipresent than chivalry, but is less obviously ridiculed, more lightly satirized, more tenderly treated; it is related to chivalry, in the composition, as sentimental to comic opera, but both are alike out of date and discarded moods living only in parody, which is in literature the last stage of extinction. The passing of the pastoral dream, however, is subordinate and not comparable to the death of the chivalric ideal; in "Don Quixote" it is the latter that strikes the tragic note. Whether Cervantes was himself conscious of this note of tragedy in his work must remain forever obscure; if he was aware of it, he very successfully concealed his knowledge. He began with pure comic intention and made fun of the chivalric tradition, and very rough fun it was, nor did it grow less rough. His treatment of the knight is not free from coarseness, and is unremitting in cruelty; here are the standards of the practical joker and the buffoon-stage; but it may be usefully remembered that Cervantes's scale of cruelty in life was one familiar with the ways of the Turk and the pains of the Christian victims in Algiers. Primarily a comedy by its conception and unflinching conduct, "Don Quixote" gave out the note of tragedy only in our own latter days. In this aspect, it is a myth of the modern mind, which has taken

CERVANTES

on new meanings and disclosed fresh phases of significance with time, as is the way of myths; with this Cervantes had nothing to do. As he did not see in his hero the incarnation of his country's fate, neither did he see in him the last and greatest of knight-errants. He did not look with our eyes; and it is only through the perspective of centuries that we recognize the historic moment, and discern the famous knight, a great-hearted gentleman, standing in his travesty at the grave of chivalry.

The unconscious element, or what seems such, in the works of the highest genius, is their most immortal part. There is a mystical union of the race with these great works; they are humanized as much by the adoption of mankind as by their original creation. The general human spirit enters into them; they blend with it and become impersonal; in the large results of time — in mythologies, in the legend of chivalry, in the masterpieces of culture — they become racial products, unindebted to individuals. It is thus that "Don Quixote" is enfranchised from being the book of a country or of a historic moment merely, and becomes a great book of the modern spirit. It rises with the vigour of world-life in it, and bears the supreme title of a book of humanity. It contains the experience, the thought, the doubt of man. This comedy is found to be the tragedy of all idealism. If this is not the aspect under which it has most widely

GREAT WRITERS

spread as a book of popular amusement, it is thus that it has most profoundly affected the mind of modern times. Mephistopheles and Don Quixote are the two great myths that the modern world has generated out of itself, as characteristic as Achilles in Homeric time or Roland in the middle ages or Amadis in the Renaissance. They are forms of its deepest consciousness, types created in its own image, planets cast from its own orb. The modern world is psychological, and this book contains a psychology seemingly as elementary and comprehensive as a law of nature; it is sceptical, and this book utters, as no other does, the *double entendre* of life; it is pessimistic, and this book makes the most destructive impeachment of life. Doubtless one goes far from Cervantes in such thoughts; but if he did not fathom, we may well believe that he felt the deeper meanings of his book, for even in the eyes of the comedian it is a book of much sadness.

The double nature of life is put to the fore. There is an opposition in human nature, and this is set forth by the contrast of Don Quixote and Sancho. It is rendered in them by divers ways as the antithesis of the imagination with the senses, of the life of thought with the life of fact, of illusion with reality, of the eloquent discourse with the proverb, of the poetry with the prose of life; but, essentially, this polarity is in the double aspect of

CERVANTES

life as soul and sense. Cervantes decides for neither; he presents both as liable to error. He portrays Don Quixote with the characteristic defect of the soul, imaginative illusion; and he gives to Sancho the characteristic defect of the material man, self-interest. The higher nature betrayed by its own nobility, the lower duped by its own baseness — that is the two-edged sword of life. That is the human comedy.

It is in the madness of Don Quixote that the heart of the book beats. It is a very singular madness. The invention manifested in the narrative is generally thought to be its prime literary trait; but its verisimilitude, the skill with which it keeps the quaking edge of truth and fiction, is as marvellous; and nowhere more than in Don Quixote's madness are the shades made subtle. It is a very normal madness. Don Quixote does not differ much from other men in his mental processes. He interprets the sights and sounds of the actual world by his past experience; only, as he has lived in the world of books a life of imagination, his experience is unreal, his memory is inapplicable to the world about him, or, as is said, his inferences are all wrong. His illusions have an origin from without, and are misinterpretations of the external world, due to an expectancy in his own mind which has arisen from his absorbed reading of romances. His senses are overlaid with thought, and he sees what he expects

GREAT WRITERS

to see. It is impossible, too, to acquit him of a certain complicity with his own madness. He shows it when he refrains from testing his second helmet; in the fact that he was not fully persuaded he was a knight-errant till the Duke treated him as such; and unmistakably in his tale of what happened in the Cave of Montesinos, where Sancho frankly charges him with making it up; at the end, too, his recovery seems, in part at least, self-willed. The history of his madness, also, has a method in it; in the first part he is his own victim; in the second he is the victim of others; beginning with self-deception, he ends as the butt of the deception of all from Sancho to the Duke and the Bachelor. His madness is intermittent; if his mind is in fact diseased, it is by a capability of going mad under certain exciting causes, but on all other occasions he is as remarkable for judgment as for learning and eloquence.

This strange madness of Don Quixote is comic in its accidents, in its circumstantial defeat, in its earthly environment; but in itself it is tragic. Its seat is in the very excellency of the soul; its illusions take body in the noblest human aims, the most heroic nature and virtue of the purest strain. A madman has no character; but it is the character of Don Quixote that at last draws the knight out of all his degradations and makes him triumph in the heart of the reader. Modern dismay begins

CERVANTES

in the thought that here is not the abnormality of an individual but the madness of the soul in its own nature. That high aims may be ridiculous; that heroism may be folly; that virtue may be insanity; that the ideal which was the spiritual wealth of the fathers may be the farce of the children; that the soul in its exaltation, its gentleness and sacrifice, has no necessary wisdom and in its own vision no warrant of reality; that the good cast down, the kind trampled on, the brave broken, become the laughter of the world; these are the truths which make "Don Quixote" such sorry reading for the idealist. He thought to make the reality of things curtsy to the lie in his mind; but that lie was itself the substantive virtue of his soul. This is the paradox of idealism. ✓

Don Quixote, so far as the Knight of the Rueful Feature is concerned, would indeed be a pitiful farce to modern feeling, were not his madness typical of the partial sanity of mankind. Still as in old time a man finds what he goes out to seek; a man sees his own face in the world; and man is still a victim of past greatness. These are capital truths. Imaginative illusion, the soul's vice, is common in life, and affects most the best of men, and especially those of great emotional capacity, and since emotional imagination is the principal feeder of the religious and moral energies of men, this illusion most characterizes men of ideal temper possessed with the

GREAT WRITERS

ideas of rescue, sacrifice and battle, and arises most frequently in the field of the reform of the world. A man of one or few ideas does not differ from Don Quixote psychologically, except in degree. Whether his experience is bookish or real, he confines his attention to a specially selected and usually narrow theme, neglects the correctives that life furnishes, and becomes absorbed in his mastering preconception of life; he is infatuated. Often he exhibits a like complicity with his own partial madness, suppresses irreconcilable facts, and refuses to think in their direction. Often, too, he passes on from the stage of self-deception, in which he is only his own victim, and becomes the victim of others practising on him, whom they profess to take at his own estimate, for gain, convenience, or amusement. The parallel is easily followed out, and the fact is recognized in the word Quixotic, which has become a familiar term in all languages. Such Quixotism is inherent in the social ideal, especially as held in youth, which having necessarily an inaccurate idea of life indulges those hopes natural to the human breast which can have no accomplishment in reality; and it is imbedded in inherited beliefs and the tradition of education, which contain an element of the past inapplicable to the changing present; the outworn creed, the lost cause, all shells of past faith and passion are its strongholds. In this lies the permanent truth of

CERVANTES

the book to life. Illusion, and specifically the illusion of the noble mind inheriting a great past, is the original mark of Quixotism; and the moral which men have read into it is, the finer the soul, the more utter its earthly defeat. The hero from whom it took its name marked a great break in the moral ideals of the race as things of practice; and in the futility of his high behaviour, reaching the height of the ridiculous, seems too clearly to exemplify the earthly defeat of the ideal; a defeat so absolute that the best one can say is — he was wholly mad.

The point of view is that of a dying age. So Demosthenes felt on the eve of the Hellenizing of the Mediterranean world, and Brutus on the eve of its imperialization; so, on the scale of personal life, an old man feels. "Don Quixote" is an old man's book. Cervantes applied a destructive criticism to the higher nature of man, in its aims, methods, and intelligence; the waste of noble nature, the practical inefficiency of virtue did not disturb him; sceptical in that he saw the fallibility of the soul, as such, in its own vision, and pessimistic in that he recognized the impotence of the soul as such in action, he remains serene; the governing factor in human life is its mortal condition, not its spiritual motive, he concludes. Passion, how sublime it is! but oh, the irony of it at last! and no form of it so ironical as the passion for reforming the world, the will to serve mankind!

GREAT WRITERS

Cervantes is disillusioned; he has accepted the disillusionment; he smiles at it. The peculiarity of "Don Quixote" is that all this is set forth with loud laughter, with frank and overflowing sympathy with the world as it is, with delight in all its various material life and people. It is the world of Maritornes, of Ginés de Pasamonte, of Roque Guinart, of the innkeepers and muleteers, of the graceless duke and his duchess, of real people; it is not Don Quixote's world. It is this acceptance of life as it is, of the lower element in life, that is the complement in the book to the denial of the old ideal. Here is the victory of realism, of the positive spirit, of the oncoming age, of prose and sense and actuality, the modern time. Don Quixote closes a period, and in all that relates to him there is the pathos of death, the hopelessness of failure, the despair of the end; in all he is, the eye is reverted to the past and sees its dissolution, the death of aristocracy in its ideal as it was to die in its person on the French scaffold. Faith in the ideal is dead in the book to the last spark. The key of ideal faith had passed into the hands of the new genius of the changing world, democracy, of which Cervantes knew nothing; he saw and helped to mould the body of the new real world, but its spirit was not yet born. It is because the ideal in "Don Quixote" has no spiritual future that its outworn and lifeless forms are such a mockery of the soul. It brings, too, the immor-

CERVANTES

tal doubt. Will the democratic ideal in its evolution prove as inapplicable to the enduring life of man as have the other great historic ideals of the race? Is there nothing absolute in the soul? Is "Don Quixote" finally greatest in its philosophy, as a book of that relativity which the modern spirit finds in all things and most dearly loves?

"Don Quixote" is the book of the one great defeat, but also of many victories, and especially those of prose, realism, and humour in modern literature. Of all the victories which it embodies, however, the greatest is that of Cervantes over himself. The unfailing cheerfulness of its spirit is the temperament of Cervantes playing through it. He had lived and toiled, he had felt the full passion of life, he had dreamed and planned and striven, both as man and writer, in arms and letters, and he had met for the most part only the blows of fortune; wounds and slavery, neglect and poverty, the well-known wages of genius, had been paid him in full measure. Yet every indication of his personality that survives shows him unspoiled and still companionable, pleasant, patient. It was in this spirit that, being about to die, he bade farewell to all. Scott at the end of his days, with Wordsworth and others about him in the library at Abbotsford, asked Lockhart to read the scene. Allan, the painter, "remembered nothing he ever saw with such sad pleasure as the

GREAT WRITERS

attitudes of Scott and Wordsworth as the story went on.” It was a scene that recalls that other death of Tennyson, lying with his open Shakspeare in the moonlight. “ Good-bye, humours; good-bye, pleasant fancies; good-bye, merry friends, for I perceive I am dying, in the wish to see you happy in the other life.” These were Cervantes’s last words in his world. The most profound master of the irony of life preserved his heart uncorroded by that knowledge, as he had kept it sweet against the enmity of man and fortune.



Great Writers

II



SCOTT

Sir Walter Scott, the prince of prose romancers, should be reckoned among the great benefactors of mankind. Of the works of prose in the nineteenth century, which have contributed to human happiness on the universal scale, the Waverley Novels hold a place by virtue of their millions of readers; and now, coming into the hands of the fourth generation, they are still one of the principal effective contemporary possessions of the English race in literature. Criticism, which sooner or later, assails all works of great fame, has the most trifling effect upon them; they are invulnerable in the hearts of the people. They contain so much humanity in its plain style; they disclose such romantic scenes, such stir of gallantry, such a high behaviour, in connection with events and personages otherwise memorable; and they are, besides, so coloured with the hues of the mind arising from local association, imaginative legend, historic glamour and

GREAT WRITERS

the sense of the presence of fine action, that their reception by the heart is spontaneous. Especially, they contain Scotland as Don Quixote contains Spain, only upon a broader and more diversified scale. Cervantes, indeed, comes into one's mind in connection with Scott in many ways.

Scott's descent was like that of Cervantes. He was of the old blood, but born in a modest station. If the changes of time had not reduced his family stock to the condition of the poor hidalgo, they had much tempered its original border strain. Scott was as much attached to his ancestors as a New Englander, and was continually harking back in his anecdotes — and he had a full repertory of such tales of the house — to “Auld Watt” of Harden and “Beardie” of Teviotdale, while through these worthies and otherwise he could trace the affluents of his blood to the great Scotch houses, among which he took particular pride in Buccleugh. His father was a simple lawyer, whose portrait is exactly drawn in Saunders Fairford, in “Redgauntlet,” a plain citizen, shrewd, formal, practical, well exemplifying the fixed type of the profession at Edinburgh. Perhaps the literary strain, which does not appear in the paternal ancestry, came from the mother, the daughter of an eminent physician, Dr. Rutherford, and herself well-educated; certainly, although Scott had several brothers and a sister, the

SCOTT

genius of the family was wholly allotted to him. Owing to a lameness, which developed in his right leg in childhood and was an impediment to him throughout life, the boy was in early years country-bred and much encouraged in physical exertion, for which indeed he had a natural inclination, being full of animal vigour and spirits. He said late in life — “from childhood’s earliest hour I have rebelled against external circumstances;” and in combatting this physical disadvantage he first exercised his courage and pertinacity. His deficiency did not interfere with his good comradeship as a school-boy. He walked and rode a good deal, and he bore perhaps more than his share in the rough fighting of the schools and the town then in vogue. As he passed from master to master, each of them characteristic examples of the old discipline, he did his tasks and won their interest and favour, but it was rather by his sympathetic understanding of literature than by any brilliancy of mind. He had the education of the schools as a thing of course, and it was valuable to him; but he illustrates the fact that to turn a boy loose in a library is to give him the best of all opportunities — the opportunity for self-education. He read from childhood widely and well, and while yet a boy had such an acquaintance with great literature as would now seem phenomenal, though it was precisely the same as that which a generation later New

GREAT WRITERS

England boys had at the same age, if they were so inclined. More than in his childish verses or the tales composed with his schoolmates there is the feeling of instinct in Ballantyne's school anecdote: "Come, slink over beside me, Jamie, and I'll tell you a story." Plainly in his boyhood Scott was as full of literature as he was of fight. If one could have discerned it, however, the true sign of the future was not in the literary tastes which Scott shared with others of his kind, but in the historic sense which he possessed in a peculiar degree. He was from the start deeply interested in his own country and his own people; he was an insatiable listener to the tales of "Sixty years since" and their like, to the border ballads, the legends, all the romantic growths of the Scotch memory; he had the zeal of an antiquary in seeing the places where events had happened, the old fields of battle, the ruined castle, the border-wall, or whatever spot or object history had left its mark upon. This was the gift that, like Aaron's rod, was to swallow up all the others.

It is impossible to trace in Scott, in early life, any of the self-consciousness that is apt to accompany such precocity and intensity, any sense of a call from the future. His father tolerated and indulged these tastes, but to his practical mind a literary career for his son would hardly have occurred. The youth was docile, was ap-

SCOTT

prenticed in his father's office, and at twenty-one was called to the bar. Meanwhile he maintained his literary pursuits as a matter of course. Intellectual interest at that time was still a part of men's life, and in the clubs of good fellowship, where Scott delighted to make one and was often a leading spirit, literature had its share with other topics. Thus it happened that he was among the first of his contemporaries to feel the attraction of German literature, then reaching England, and to acquire some knowledge of it; the kinship of its ballad and romance with the spirit of the border, which was already growing incarnate in Scott, prepared a ready welcome for it in his sympathies. Nothing is more remarkable in Scott's life than its entire naturalness. He never made an effort, hardly a choice; he merely did the next thing; so now he did not think of adopting literature as a career, but it was natural for him to try his hand at a translation. Life went on as naturally, too, in other ways. The course of true love not running smooth, he was left with a memory of early devotion which diffused a pathetic tenderness over his recollections of youth; and in the lapse of time — not too long a lapse — he married happily an English-bred lady of French birth, being speedy in both the wooing and the wedding. In his cottage at Lasswade and afterwards on the little estate of Ashestiel he had a characteristic home, filled with his per-

GREAT WRITERS

sonality, and in both he showed that passion for making the place his own which was later displayed on the grand scale at Abbotsford. He made no great progress at the bar, and as time went on he habitually ascribed something of this slowness to the unfavourable effect of his literary avocations on his professional reputation. Tenacity, however, was characteristic of him. He never let go of anything while it would hold. He knew the ways of his world, too, and was not averse to them; and in this case wisdom was justified of her child. At twenty-eight he was made sheriff of Selkirkshire, and five years later obtained the additional post of clerk to the Court of Session; and although he did not at once come into the emoluments of the latter, the two places secured him for life an ample independence and honourable station. His position in the working world was that of a gentleman of the law with clerical and executive duties.

It may be that this security of tenure as a practical man contributed something to Scott's attitude toward the profession of literature — a view exceptional among authors — as a mode of life like any other, and consequently to his remarkable freedom from literary vanity. He was always a man of many affairs, of which literature was only one; and it took its place as a normal part of life. It is likely, however, that the slowness of his development as an author was the fundamental cause of his

SCOTT

taking so sober a view. His precocity never took the form of immature publication. In the case of no genius is the gradual hiving of the material on which it was to work so marked, the unhurried ripening of faculty so like a process of nature; and Scott seems all the time as ignorant of what was to be the outcome as the seed and blade are of the full corn in the ear. He was an out-of-doors man as he had been a tramping boy. It is impossible to think of him without his horses and dogs. His duties as sheriff took him across country continually, and he always had more months out of Edinburgh than in it notwithstanding his clerkship. He was thus in constant contact with Scotch life and country, and he never lost or relaxed his first impulse, to know and see with his eyes, so far as his eyes could see it, all the local history. He was also in love with the genius of Scotland as it was stamped in the people of all sorts and conditions. Human nature, the rough hard article free from its alloy of the town, was treasure-trove to him. On those annual "raids into Liddesdale," and on many another journey, he made himself master of this book of truth out of which came so much of the character, anecdote and phrase that are most sterling, real and humorous in his books. For all such actuality in the country-side he had the same tenacity of mind that Lincoln showed in his circuit-riding, and he was as full of genuine telling anecdote

GREAT WRITERS

gathered from the living lip. He was, too, most companionable; "he met every man," it was said, "like his blood relation." In these "raids" and journeys there was much roughness, but it was welcome to him as having some taste of the old border life. The country people were fond of him; to them he was to the end of his days "the Sheriff." In Edinburgh, also, he held a vigorous and social life with men. In the times of the fear of Napoleonic invasion, he had been a live patriot and cavalryman, quartermaster of the Light Horse, and took his share of camp and drill with great zest, while still in the late twenties of life; and he was always a fearless horseman, preferring the turbulent ford to the safe passage and never "going round" for anything in the way. If he "broke the neck of the day's work" before breakfast, as was his lifelong habit, it was a matter of necessity; for a man who spent the greater part of the day in physical activity and exercise could have a fresh mind only in the morning. It was in those early hours that he accomplished his literary work; and if there was much mechanical routine in the practice, perhaps his youthful experience as a writer of legal foolscap had accustomed him to the drudgery of the desk. In a life of such variety and scope, so full of work of all kinds, with many active interests, overflowing too with hospitality and rich in friendships, genius less abundant

SCOTT

and powerful than Scott's would have been overwhelmed, but he had the knack to turn it all into new resources.

Until Scott was past thirty he may well have thought of literature as only the busiest and most delightful part of his leisure, and have seemed to himself as to others the son of the old lawyer treading in his father's footsteps to a like mediocre fortune. He was of a more generous make, it is true; he was not at all a precisian; there was much freedom for human nature in Edinburgh life, and he took his share; in the careless cheer of his youthful days and in the hearty sociability of his manhood there was something that would now be thought boisterous; boy and man, conviviality was warm in his blood. He was one of those men who diffuse a physical glow about them. But also, it is plain, there was something in him that set him distinctly apart; the unlikeness which isolates genius, felt before it is recognized, like the electric air of the undischarged cloud; in every company, however varied, though never too much the leader, he was the interesting man. There was a glow in his mind as well as in his blood. It was not literary ambition exactly; though he says that when he wrote the song of Young Lochinvar he was "passionately ambitious of fame," it was more the flash of a young man's feeling than the awakening of resolute ambition. Though

so widely and well read in literature and with a real bookishness in his tastes, his genius was not at all bookish. The glow in his mind was vital, and nourished on life, and it flowed almost entirely from that historic sense, that absorbed interest in his own country and people, which was the master-light in which he saw life. He attracted all Scottishness to himself as by the necessity of a fairy gift. If any delver in the old literature was in the neighbourhood, such as the marvellous Leyden, he was close in his company; if there was a kindred scholar across the border, like Ellis, he was in correspondence with him; and with such men he began that growing circle of friendships by letter, re-enforced with occasional visits, which is one of the most agreeable and peculiar pleasures of the literary life and in Scott's case was so large and interesting a part of his biography. He had, for the time, concentrated his antiquarian interest in the endeavour to collect and edit the ballads which he finally issued as the "Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border," and in particular attention to old metrical romances. This work was really a stage in his preparation to write, a stone that marks his progress in that absorption of Scotland into his own genius which he was unconsciously accomplishing without a thought of its ulterior end. He was so far, in the line of his true development, only a literary antiquary.

SCOTT

The beginnings of his literary career, which antedated the "Minstrelsy," did not grow out of his true material, but in a curiously opposite way were distinctly bookish. His faculty of imagination was stirred independently and apart from the subjects it was to operate upon habitually. He made some translations from the German ballads, and also a version of Goethe's "Goetz von Berlichingen;" and in connection with these studies he tried some original ballads of his own. He was then twenty-eight years old and he describes these as his first "serious attempts at verse." Two years later when he published the early volumes of the "Minstrelsy," the idea that he might make literature an important part of his life seems to have been distinctly formed, and it had found its true roots. The close tie, the natural birth indeed, of his first poem, "The Lay of the Last Minstrel," out of the deepest prepossession of his mind, is obvious. He wrote it, perhaps, with as little self-confidence as ever any distinguished poet felt in composing his first work, and was as much surprised by its reception as the world was at its appearance. He won at once a popular crown which no hand feebler than Byron's was to wrest from him. He had then already reached his thirty-fourth year. "Marmion," and "The Lady of the Lake," which quickly followed, confirmed his poetic fame; on these three tales in verse, together with a score of lyrics, his

permanent vogue as what he might have called "a rhymers" rests.

The merit of Scott's poetry has been much attacked by latter-day critics; but there is a reasonable view to be taken of it, and within its limitations its worth is still unimpaired. Its survival, notwithstanding the immensely greater work of the poets who followed him — men who were purely poets — shows life at the root. It had originality, and retains its force. Scott broke new ground; he discovered material which had natural poetry, and he treated it in a novel manner, appropriate to the subject and stimulating to the mind. If he borrowed his metre from Coleridge, he applied it in a manner and on a scale that Coleridge was incapable of. He was an experimenter in a new kind, and in it was wholly self-educated; such real defects as there are in the verse are incidental to its being tentative work. There is more power than craft, more life than skill; he succeeds by spontaneity more than by art. The careless cross-country gallop of the metre is in keeping with the verve and unevenness which characterize the whole; but the blood is kept awake. His great power of narrative tells the tale, but the interest is less in the individuals than in the kind of life depicted, the baronial hall, the border battle, the Highland romance; he revived the times he treated in enduring colours, which replace history in the memory for

SCOTT

his district equally with Shakspeare's plays for the kingdom. He gave especially to the Highlands an imaginative memory which annexed them to the lands which have a meaning to the general heart of man; he alone gave that charm to Loch Katrine and its environs which lifts the scene above the savagery of nature. It is not due only to his description, but he placed action there. It is an error to think of nature-poetry as lying in the sphere of contemplation, merely because that was Wordsworth's way; out-of-doors poetry, such as Byron's tales, often contains more of nature in the mingling of the great scene with the action than any number of addresses to flowers of the wayside and lonely weeds on the rocks. In Scott, fair as the landscape is, nature is more than landscape; it is the place of the action, the breathing air of life itself. The action, moreover, which is the main interest, is unsurpassed in the quality of gallantry, in the stirring moment and the personal adventure. He is the most martial of English poets; excepting a half-dozen lyrics and ballads by Campbell, and one or two others, there is nothing in our poetry to rival him in this respect. This is the Homeric fighting quality that some find in his verse, and there is truth in the remark. It is said that he "pleases boys;" that is not against him. The obviousness of his meaning, the fact that his ideas, images and language are within easy reach of the aver-

age mind, the presence of much ordinariness in the substance, as they partly account for his ready popularity and its wide spread, also denote his permanent appeal; for with all this, which is called his commonness, there goes that most uncommon power to stir the blood, to send the soul out of doors, to revivify lost romantic modes of life in all their picturesque colour, their daring spirit, their emotional reality. He makes his reader live the life, and it is not only the life of a past age but it is one of the great permanent types of life. It appeals to all freemen; the echo of it, the desire for it, are in their blood. I have referred to the sneer that Scott "pleases boys." He does. It was "many and many a year ago, in a kingdom by the sea," that my own fourteenth summer was made happy with this delight. I remember that I read every line of his verse with eagerness and poured out my admiration in a longer essay than this is likely to prove. The experience was not a bad one for a boy who, at the yet more tender age of twelve had been deep in Byron and melancholy. It is thirty years and more since then; but to this day the clang of the verse of Branksome Hall turns all the iron of my blood to music, and the sight of the falling standard on Flodden Field is the most I shall ever know of the heart of Sidney "moved more than with a trumpet." This is the sort of mastery in which Scott is great,

SCOTT

for both boy and man. The personal reminiscence only gives emphasis to what is broadly true. 'Poetry, in the mould which Scott commanded, could not give expression to his whole genius; it is not in verse that he did his great work; but he had set the fashion and showed the way for Byron — in itself surely no small thing — and when Byron "beat" him, as he said, he turned to prose fiction and came into his own. It is not the least of his honours as a man that after Byron had surpassed him, and in fact dethroned him in the popular breath, Scott made and kept his friendship and, notwithstanding their profound difference in character, defended his name and fame against the bitter storm of English enmity. He did not, however, give up the tale in verse at once, just as he had not given up the law. It was not in his nature, as has been said, to let go. He continued to write metrical romances, but none of them have the same boldness of execution or the same cling to the mind that belonged to the earlier efforts. In these poetic years, too, he had done what in any other man would in itself have seemed abundant labour, in massive editorial work and other miscellaneous literary ways. His poems represent, after all, but a fragment of his immense energy; and now, feeling the need of appealing to the public in a new line, he solved the situation by taking up a new and unfinished task.

GREAT WRITERS

The entrance of Scott on the field of prose fiction bears a close resemblance to his *début* in poetry. It has the same tentativeness, the character of an experiment. He had long had in mind an attempt to depict the manners of his country in prose. He had read Miss Edgeworth's Irish tales, and he thought something like that could be done for Scotland. He had for some years been privately interested with Ballantyne in the printing business; and the fact had turned his mind to the problems of publishing and kept him keenly alive to the opportunities of trade, as if he had been — as essentially he was — a publisher's adviser. He was always interested in "bringing out" something, and the usefulness of his own faculties in feeding the press was a constant element in the business. Like Cervantes, again, he tried all kinds; but his first experiment in fiction had not seemed promising. He began "*Waverley*" in 1805, just after the publication of the "*Lay of the Last Minstrel*;" he resumed it five years later and was again discouraged; after another interval, finding the manuscript while he was hunting for fishing tackle, he wrote the last two volumes in three weeks, in 1813, and it was published anonymously early the next year. Its success, which is one of the legends of literature, was as far beyond expectation as that of "*The Lay*" had been in its time; and he followed it up, just as he had done in poetry, with that

SCOTT

rapid succession of triumph after triumph which made him in the end one of the leading figures of contemporary Europe and the national glory of his own country.

The "Author of Waverley" was forty-three years old when he began the great series; but though the discovery and application of his powers have the semblance of accident, both his success and his fertility were the direct result of slowly maturing causes. That long living of material and ripening of faculty had gone on without any consciousness of the end to which they were to be applied; but the preparation was complete, and Scott had now found the work — a necessity of genius — into which he could put the whole of himself. His primary endowment was the historic sense, in which he excelled all other English imaginative writers, and in him it was bred of such love of country as to be an impelling passion of patriotism. His love of Scotland was as close to him as his family pride, and his life was a thing of direct contact with what he loved. His tenacity, remarkable in all its manifestations, became genius when applied to anything Scottish. He had an ocular memory of the places he had seen; probably there is no local spot described in his Scotch novels that is not a direct transcript from nature; and the native landscape had so filled his mind that, at the end, in the soft environs of Naples he could see only Scotland; "on proceeding," says his

GREAT WRITERS

companion there, remarking on this, "he repeated in a grave tone and with great emphasis:

*"Up the craggy mountain, and down the mossy glen
We canna gang a-milking, for Charlie and his men."*

There was the same prepossession of his mind with the historical and living characters of the land, its feuds and legends, its past and present. In truth, in these years of unconscious preparation he was not unlike Don Quixote reading the romances of chivalry; his mind was charged with Scotland, and when he went forth into the world as a novelist spent itself in the things of fiction, in a Quixotic enthusiasm. He lived much of the time in an imaginary world, as he said, not only when he was actually composing but in his mood of mind; it had been so from childhood; he had partly realized this world in poetry, he completely embodied it in prose. His active professional duties, which were of a routine nature, and his out-of-doors life with men and practical affairs were, no doubt, a means of keeping the balance of sanity, of actuality, in his life; but, for all that, he had built up a world of his own in which his mind lived. It was this world which came to birth in the Waverley Novels, primarily in the Scotch tales, which are the core of the series, and secondarily in the foreign tales, including the English, which often have large Scotch elements and are

all created on the same ground principles. As on the ideal side, like Don Quixote, his mind was imbued with a past age that gave its colours to his waking life, so too on the side of actuality, like the Knight of La Mancha's author, he had gone up and down in the land and knew all its people, high and low, noble and peasant and cate-ran, its professions and trades, its servants, its castaways and poor scholars, the whole range of its human types; for the ideal and the actual, and they were homogeneous and not opposed in his case, he was equally well furnished; his representation of Scotland would be as complete as Cervantes had made of Spain, and vaster.

The oneness of his genius—the fact that the same power is here at work that produced the poems—is shown by the identical way in which he approached his task. The defects of “Waverley,” as an experimental trial, are the same as those of “The Lay;” “The Antiquary” is better made in the same way as “Marmion.” He owed little, if anything, to example in either case; he was self educated both as poet and novelist. The virtues of mere craft do not count for much in his success in prose any more than in verse. Construction is loose, composition is rapid and careless; art is secondary to matter. Sheer power of genius, however, is there with its inevitable and brilliant mastery of the situation. It takes the same direction as in the poems; the novelist does not aim

GREAT WRITERS

at a tale of individual fortunes, but he endeavours to represent a kind of life. It is this that gives him breadth of meaning. It is social not private life that he sets forth. In a novel there may be many elements — the plot, the hero, situation, dialogue, tableau, atmosphere and the like; and these may be subordinated or emphasized separately in infinite combinations. The faults which criticism charges to Scott's form largely proceed from a too limited and rigid conception, from the point of view of construction, of what narrative art consists in. In fact his novel bears, in its relation to the more unified type, some resemblance to the chronicle play in its relation to the more organized drama. He seeks, under the impulse of his historic sense, a broader effect than any tale of individual life can give — a social effect. He is apt to set his particular story in a stream of general events, to which the fortunes of the individuals are related, but the interest is less in the plot than in the stream of events. He thus gives a truer perspective to life and greater significance to his matter. The control of the plot, and its issues, are apt to lie at a distance, in what may be called a kind of machination in the background, as the affair of the house of Osbaldiston in "Rob Roy," or old Elspeth's secret in "The Antiquary." The encompassing of a larger world is round about the story. Like all the greatest writers, Scott gives the great scene of life always; it

SCOTT

is a crowded stage, a world full of people. In such a scene the hero may occupy an unimportant place; the interest is not primarily in him. It is a feudal, commercial, political world, filled with fixed types; there is an abundance of stock characters; to set forth the manners and concerns of this world largely in a vivid human way, to be, as it were a public historian, not a writer of private memoirs, is Scott's scope. The fortunes of the individuals being inserted in this envioning world, much as the dialect is inlaid in the English, the progress of the tale is managed by a succession of scenes. Scott's greatest talent of execution lay in the depicting of these scenes; if he was not a dramatist, there was something theatrical in his faculty, and though he could not write a play, no one could better stage an incident. These scenes are of all kinds; indoor scenes with the fidelity of Dutch masters, such as the hut in "Rob Roy" or Norna's dwelling; out-of-door scenes of infinite variety like the vengeance of Rob's wife or the drover's foray at the end; scenes of all degrees of spirited action and emotional play, or simple instances of noble behaviour like the farewell of the prince in "Redgauntlet." Scott has an unrivalled power of realizing life at such times, and here he centres human interest, while about this incessant stream of incidents conducted by persons suffering and doing there is constantly felt the play of great forces, social, political,

GREAT WRITERS

hereditary, the sense of life as an element in which lives exist and here presented especially and most powerfully as a thing of history and nationality.

Such a presentation of national history and manners, maintaining a permanent hold on the people whom it depicts, must necessarily have great veracity. Imagination could not part company with fact in such a case. The basis of reality in the *Waverley Novels* is one of their most distinguishing qualities, and underlies their endurance in literature. It is not merely that particular characters are studied from life; that George Constable and John Clerk sat for "The Antiquary," that Scott himself is Mr. Mannering, that Laidlaw or another is Dandie Dinmont; nor is it that other characters, like Meg Merrilies and the gypsies are suggestions from living figures that had arrested the author's passing glance. It is not that the scene of "Castle Dangerous" is governed by what his eye beheld on his visit there, or the whole landscape of "The Pirate" transcribed from his voyages among the islands of the north. Still less is it what he gained from books, either of ordinary history and records of events or such sermons as those from which he transferred the dark and intense eloquence of "Old Mortality." He had such a marvellous memory for whatever bore the national stamp, he was so brain-packed with the ocular and audible experience of his

SCOTT

converse with the people, so full of their physiognomy, gesture and phrase, that he fed his narrative incessantly with actuality; and such was his surplus of treasure of this sort that in his general edition he continued to pour out an illustrative stream of anecdote, reminiscence and antiquarian lore in the notes and prefaces. A keen friend was confirmed in his belief of Scott's authorship by the presence of a striking phrase that he had heard him once use. The Scotch novels are, as it were, an amalgam of memory. When he came to write them all his love of tradition and the country-side with which his mind was impregnated was precipitated in an unfailing flow. It was because Scott was so much alive with Scotland that he made his imaginary characters live with that intense reality, that instant conviction of their truth, in which he is to be compared only with Shakspeare. It is true that it was a man of letters who wrote the Waverley Novels, a mind fed on the stuff of mediæval romance and on the tradition of the English drama, the "old play" of which he was so fond; but the literary element in the tales is a thing of allusion, like Waverley's studies, or episodical as in the character of Bunce or on a more important scale of Sir Percie Shafton, or else its rambling antiquarianism serves to set forth Scotch pedantry appropriately. The Waverley Novels are not a development out of older literature, they are an original growth, a fresh form of the

imaginative interpretation of the human past, a new and vital rendering straight from the life. Even in the tales whose scene is laid in England and the continent, where Scott was more dependent on printed sources, the literary element is little more perceptible than in the Scotch novels themselves; the sense of reality in them is not appreciably less. But Scott already had the best historical education as a living discipline in assimilating his own country and he came to the interpretation of history in other lands with trained powers of understanding and imagination in that field. A distinguished historian once expressed to me his admiration for "Count Robert of Paris," and I was glad to find such unexpected support for my own liking of this novel, which is generally regarded, I believe, as a pitiable example of Scott's mental decline; but my friend had been struck, he said, by its remarkable grasp of history, its brilliant adequacy in that way. It was the same power with which Scott had grasped "Ivanhoe," and told the tale of Quentin Durward, and made Richard Lion-heart like one of Shakspeare's kings. He had learned the way by making history alive on his own heath in the most living contact with the past that ever man had.

Veracity is the first great quality of the Waverley Novels. The second is emotional power. Scott was a man of strength; he liked strong deeds and strong men;

SCOTT

and he liked strong emotions. I do not mean the passion of love, in which he showed little interest. The way of a man with a maid was not to him the whole of life. In the national temperament in its action in history he found two great emotions: the passion of loyalty, which was incarnate in the Cavaliers and clans, and the enthusiasm of religion which filled the Covenanters. These were social forces and supported a lifelong character in men. They gave ideal elevation to the tragic and cruel events which belong to Scotch history, and made an atmosphere about the actors which glowed with life. Scott shared to the full the national capacity for enthusiasm, and was in his own imaginary world as much a Jacobite as he was a border-raider; and he put into his representation a fervour hardly less than contemporary. He was master, too, on the scale of private as opposed to public feeling, of all the moods of sorrow and especially of that dark brooding spirit, frequent in the Scotch character, which he has repeatedly drawn. Such emotion, in the people or in individuals, is the crucible of romance. He used its fires to the full. Whether the scene be battle-broad or dungeon-narrow, whether the passion involves the fortune of a crown or burns in the single breast of Ravenswood, he finds in these deep-flowing and overmastering human feelings the ideal substance which makes his romances so charged with power over the heart, with the

GREAT WRITERS

essential meaning of human life, in its course in character, and at its moments of personal crisis. The homogeneity of this power of passion with the events of Scotch history and with the character of the people is complete, the unity of the whole is reinforced by the romantic quality of the landscape, which is its appropriate setting. The state of society, its stage in civilization, is also in keeping. It is, in fact, a kind of Homeric world, without any fancifulness; or if, when the parallel is stated the difference is more felt than the likeness, it is a world of free action, bold character, primitive customs, as well as of high feeling and enterprise, such as has fallen to the lot of no other author since Homer to depict with the same breadth and elevation. It was good fortune for Scott, too, that he could follow Shakspeare's example in relieving the serious scene with humour. It is humour of the first quality, which lies in character itself and not in farcical action or the buffoonery of words. It centres in and proceeds from eccentricity, in which the Scottish character is also rich; nor in general is the eccentricity overstrained or monotonously insisted on. Scott is very tender of his fools, whose defectiveness in nature is never made a reproach or cruel burden to themselves; and the humorous side of his serious characters only completes their humanity. All parts of life thus enter into his general material, but harmoniously. His share

SCOTT

of artistic power was instinctive; he was never very conscious of it; but it was most remarkable in the perfect blend he made of the elements used. "The Pirate" is an admirable example. It is a sea story, and takes its whole atmosphere from the coasts where its action lies. The struggle with the elements in Mordaunt's opening journey is like an overture; the rescue of the sailor-castaway, the cliff-setting of Mertoun's house, the old Norse of the patriarch's home, and the life of the beach there with its fishing fleet, the superstitious character of Norna the weird familiar of the winds, the bardic lays of Claude Halcro, the sentimental pirate-father and the son with his crew, the secret of the past which unlocks the plot — all these make a combination of land, character and story, each raised in power by imaginative treatment to a romantic height and echoing the same note of the sea one to the other in a blend as naturally one as sky, cliff and weather. As a sea piece, given by character and event as well as by description, it is an unrivalled work, and this is due to its artistic keeping. This power of blend was an essential element in Scott's genius; by it his romance becomes integral in plot, character and setting; and this felicity of composition achieves in its own way the same end in artistic effect that is sought in another way by construction in the strict sense. Scott never fails in unity of feeling; it was a part of his emotional gift.

GREAT WRITERS

The third commanding trait of the Waverley Novels is creative power. It is this that places Scott among the greatest imaginative prose writers of the world, and makes him the first of romancers as Shakspeare is the first of dramatists. He had that highest faculty of genius which works with the simplicity of nature herself and has something magical in its immediacy, in the way in which it escapes observation and in its instant success; he speaks the word, and there is a world of men, moving, acting, suffering in the wholeness of life. These masters of imagination, too, have as many moulds as nature; whoever appears on the scene of Homer or Shakspeare, no one is surprised; and Scott was as fertile as any of his kind. He is a master of behaviour, for both gentleman and peasant, and of the phrases that seem the very speech of a man's mouth. The world of gentlemen is represented in its motives and interests, its sacrifices and ideas for both age and youth, with a sympathetic comprehension that makes it seem the most just tribute ever given to the essential nobility of that kind of life, aristocratic in ideal, warring, terrible in what it did and what it suffered, but habitually moving in a high plane of conduct and having for its life-breath that passion of loyalty, which however unreasoning, or mistaken, is one of the glorious virtues of men. The world of humble life, likewise, is rendered with vivid truth in its pursuits, trials

SCOTT

and submissions, the virtues welling from the blood itself in peril, sorrow, natural affection, for man and woman, for every time of life and in every station of the poor. It is in the language of these characters that the life lies with most efficacy; only nature makes men and women who can speak thus; and the solidity of their speech is a part of the simplicity of their lives. Cuddie's mother in "Old Mortality," the old fisherman, Macklebackit, in "The Antiquary," Jennie Deans in "The Heart of Midlothian" are examples; but Scott's truth of touch in such dealing with the poor is unfailing. If the behaviour of his gentlemen appeals to the sense of chivalry in every generous breast, the words of his humble persons go straight to the heart of all humanity. In both classes there is a vitality that is distinguishable from life itself only by its higher power. He creates from within; he shows character in action so fused that the being and the doing are one; he achieves expression in its highest form — the expression of a soul using its human powers in earthly life. This is the creative act; not the scientific exhibit of the development of character, not the analytic examination of psychology and motivation, for which inferior talent suffices; but the revealing flash of genius which shows the fair soul in the fair act, be it in the highest or the lowest of men, in good fortune or bad, triumphant or tragic, or on the level of all

GREAT WRITERS

men's days. It belonged to Scott's conception of life that character and act should be in perfect equipoise; to find them so is the supreme moment of art. It was the moment of Shakspeare and Homer, in drama and epic; and it is the moment of Scott in the novel. The living power of his men and women by virtue of which once in the mind they never die out of it, but remain with the other enduring figures of imagination, "forms more real than living man," proceeds from this union of passion, truth and creative power with the form and pressure of life itself. The material is always noble, and the form into which Scott throws it is manly. The impression of all he creates is of nobility; not the nobility that requires high cultivation or special consecration to supreme self-sacrifice, but such nobility as is within the reach of most men, to be honest and brave, tender and strong, simple, true and gallant, fair to a foe and faithful to our own. Scott was not greatly interested in intellect; it plays no part in his work as a governing principle; but in this neglect of it he kept the true perspective of human life; indeed — though this may seem a hard saying — his unconscious subordination of the intellectual to the active virtues and powers is one great cornerstone of his sanity and wholesomeness.

The Waverley Novels made Scott one of the famous men of Europe; he held a place of distinction unshared

SCOTT

at home, the idol of his own country, and honoured and beloved in every English-speaking land. He also, as is well known, made a great deal of money by them; and Scott was glad to make money. He spent it in a magnificent way, and here the trait of Quixotism is very obvious. Abbotsford, his most human monument, may be described as a romantic work, the material counterpart to his estate in imagination. Don Quixote sought the chivalric past which was the life of his brain, in contemporary Spain; and with a touch of the same madness Scott desired to realize on the banks of the Tweed something of that old baronial life which was so large a part of his memory and imagination; he added farm to farm till he had obtained a considerable domain, he built a mansion, he gathered there the museum of relics of crown, battle and clan which is still intact, and there he dispensed hospitality with ancient generosity, as the representative of his country as well as to his friends and dependents with a shadow at least of feudal state. It was a dream that almost came to pass. But at the moment of its realization the crash in his fortunes occurred which condemned him to spend the remainder of his days in a heroic effort to die an honest man. The secret of the authorship of "Waverley" was well kept on the whole; at first it was probably merely a means of guarding his reputation which he did not wish to expose to the risk of fail-

ure as a novelist; afterwards, it was useful as a means of exciting interest and there was no particular reason to change. There was another secret, however, that had been much better kept — the fact that he was a commercial partner with the printer, Ballantyne; and the occasion of his secretiveness in this case was that an interest in trade would have been regarded as inconsistent with his professional position as a lawyer. The secretiveness, the willingness to go into trade, the love of money can be turned against Scott; but, to my mind, they only make him more human, a natural man. Scott's practical attitude toward life, and also toward literature itself as a profession like any other, seems not unlike that of Shakspeare; it is the mortal side of the immortal genius which in its own realm was loosened from the sense of reality and lived in an imaginary world. Scott met the situation that confronted him with courage, an unwearied labour, a reckless expenditure of mental power and physical health which again illustrates the marvellous tenacity of his nature. He held on till he died. The story of the last days and the voyage to Italy is well known. He was a failing man. He still held the place of honour which he had won in men's minds, the love of his own and the respect of foreign nations. Goethe saluted him almost from his death-bed; and soon after Scott himself passed away at Abbotsford.

SCOTT

The fruit of Scott's life is an immeasurable good. There is the life itself, as full of kindliness as of energy, of duty as of honour, incessant in activity, many-sided, patient in official routine, with country loves, with refinement, blameless in the relations of son, brother, husband, father and friend, with room for the affections of dogs and horses and all God's creatures; a life, not saintly as we wish the lives of women to be, not without weakness, but a source of strength to others, with the right humilities and the right prides, unshaken in its loyalties, a man's life. There are the works, which have been the delight of millions of homes through four-score years. I remember one summer seeing a boy of six enacting Rob Roy, and not long after hearing Lowell tell me just before he died that he had lately read the Waverley Novels through again with much happiness; genius with a reach like that will defy time long. I have read them myself repeatedly in the passing of years, and always with a greater admiration of their literary power, their sheer creative faculty, their high strain of feeling and human truth, and their wholesomeness for the daily sympathies and moral ideals of the democracy. They are a great feature in English literature. They lie massive, like Ben Nevis and Loch Lomond, in the geography of the soul's country, where she builds her earthly mansions. One takes leave of them, for a time, but he closes

GREAT WRITERS

the volume, whatever it may be, with Tennyson's exclamation in his heart:

*“ O great and gallant Scott,
True gentleman, heart, blood, and bone,
I would it had been my lot
To have seen thee, and heard thee, and known.”*



Great Writers

III



MILTON

In the old American mind there are some books that neighbour the Bible in their appeal to the affections. Milton, Bunyan, and Cowper have this distinction. They were the books which in my boyhood I was allowed to read on the Sabbath day — old New England Sundays, days of halcyon memory, true bridals of the earth and sky, brooded on by an unshared peace that no desert solitude or mountain beauty ever knew; the yellowing pages of the worn books still exhale odours of those old summers. It is, perhaps, not over-curious to think that the honour of literature, in our earlier age, owed much to the fact that the living faith of the people was the religion of a book; and in times when, as we learn from many a pious memoir, the child in the cradle was sometimes “dedicated to God,” on both sides of the water the thought might well grow up in the boy’s mind, unconsciously flowering, that as God had once spoken

GREAT WRITERS

through a book, the spirit might still use the forms of high literature as its vehicle, the idea of the inspiration of the literary life was not far off from him. Milton and Wordsworth both felt this sense of consecration, of being men set apart, and what from the birth of Apollo has been known to the poet as the enthusiasm of the god in him, they felt in their breasts, Milton more definitely and Wordsworth more abstractly and vaguely, as a divine prompting and motion. Milton's addresses to the Muse are too passionate to be merely imaginative flights; they are poetic prayers to a real presence. The singular thing is that this is the view of posterity also toward Milton. He lives as a great and lonely figure, one of the chosen of Israel, with an almost hieratic solemnity; the blind old man who had seen heaven and its angels, the Creation and the Fall, as none other had ever beheld them, in universal vision. Even in his secular life, he seems an apostle of liberty, not a statesman or a politician or anything merely executive and official, but the impassioned preacher of freedom because his own soul was free, a great declarer of the self-evident truths of man. But it is the "Paradise Lost" that gives him his sacred character. It is a poem on the highest levels of art, derived from ancient and foreign sources, panoplied in severe scholarship, wrought in the inspiration of classicism, academic, intellectual, austere; and yet it made, and continued to

MILTON

make, and still makes such a wide popular appeal as to constitute it one of the greatest monuments of English literature, without regard to the judgment of scholars. It is not only a book; it is a part of English history, of the history of the English race. This is the marvel — and no critical problem is more difficult — what are the grounds of this broad appeal in a poem which appears in many ways so far from the people?

Milton was born a Londoner in that class of society which was the backbone of the movement for popular rights and independence in religion, in whose onward course, during his mature life, the throne fell and English liberties were secured. Little survives to inform us of his childhood except the head of the fair boy which is one of the treasures of English portraiture. He was well-bred in a Puritan home of means and taste, and though there is no sign of rigour in his bringing up, in that home must have been implanted in him in early days those finer elements of Puritanism which seem already instinctive in his first youth. His father who was a scrivener had some merit as a musical composer, and was in prosperous circumstances. He had masters for the boy and sent him to a public school, St. Paul's, where he made one deep and tender friendship with a half-Italian schoolmate, Charles Diodati. At sixteen he went up to Christ's College, Cambridge, where tradition says he

GREAT WRITERS

was called "the Lady of Christ's," his fair hair and bright cheeks and his slender youth confirming a nickname that he appears to have owed really to the purity of his life and manners and a virginal mind. He remained seven years at Christ's, and won the place of a first scholar, showing plain traces of that saving egotism which is the single trait that brings him humanly before the eye now: "performed the Collegiate and Academical exercises to the admiration of all, and was esteemed to be a virtuous and sober person," says old Anthony Wood, "yet not to be ignorant of his own parts." At Christ's he had written verses, Latin and English, among them the famous ode on the morning of Christ's Nativity; and he showed from the first touches of his hand that feeling for rich words and their melodies, the sense of the moulding that beauty of language gives to thought itself, which belongs so often to the poetic precocity of great masters of expression. There was never any immaturity in his style. He wrote perfection. Yet then, of course, no one knew that he had written one of the great lyric poems of England, singular for its majesty of thought and manner in a youth of twenty-one years, and a sonnet — that on arriving at the age of twenty-three — which, in his works, is one of the best remembered where all are memorable.

He retired from the University to Horton, near Wind-

MILTON

sor, where his father had now removed from London to live at ease; and there, the church, his original destination, being closed to him by the aspect of the times, without seeking another profession, he obtained his father's leave to pursue literary studies undisturbed. "At my father's country residence, whither he had retired to pass his old age, I was wholly intent," says Milton, "through a period of absolute leisure, on a steady perusal of the Greek and Latin writers, but still so that I occasionally exchanged the country for the city, either for the purpose of buying books, or for that of learning anything new in mathematics or in music, in which I then took delight." For the six years that remained till he was thirty, he thus enjoyed a secure and quiet period, comparable to Virgil's ease, during which he perfected himself in a studious knowledge of past literature. It was an accumulative and assimilating rather than an original period; his production of English verse was hardly greater in amount than Virgil's in similar circumstances; yet in its small body are comprised all Milton's minor poems of fame, and among them are "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," the best idyllic poems in the classical Italian manner; "Lycidas," the first of English elegies in rank; and "Comus," the only English masque that the world has cared to remember. These poems are the finest flower of the great literary movement that had

GREAT WRITERS

swept up the north from Italy for more than a century, and brought to England its great burst of genius in the reigns of Elizabeth and James; the crest of the Renaissance had broken in the turbulent dramatists, but here the golden flood of humanism was still at the full, with Italian serenity, purity, and beauty; the burning noon of passion had gone by, but a finer art, a softer mood were present in Milton's genius in its youth, simple, lucid, melodious, suffused with the perfect beauty of an age of art about to die. In these country years Milton probably looked forward only to a literary career; he was a youthful, humanist poet seeking to write as his Greek and Italian masters had done before him; perhaps such a life as Virgil's, he thought, might lie in his future. These were the first happy fruits.

The figure of Milton at this age is full of "sweet attractive grace." He was handsome in manly beauty, his mind set on high and serious thoughts, and with a strain of uncommon purity in his soul. He led a simple life in his father's house, plain in its habits; he wandered about the well-watered and well-wooded country, making his mind "a mansion for all lovely forms — a dwelling place for all sweet sounds and harmonies," or in his chamber at home moved "in the still air of delightful studies;" a natural, intellectual, poetic life, free from all disturbance. One hears that "music" in which he

MILTON

“then took delight” as its perpetual undertone. It is reflected crystal-like in the “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso,” with a selective power of art, an idyllic brevity and clearness in the scenes, an evenness of unemphatic beauty, for which there is no parallel except in classical and Italian masterpieces. This poetic softness and clearness mirrors Milton’s temper then; there is not a trace of the harsh traits that later came into his life, the sternness of his middle years and his aging into austerity. He was still a pure poet; full of a sweet sensuousness that took delight in all beautiful things; he was a lover of beauty. “What besides God has resolved concerning me I know not, but this at least” — he is writing to a friend — “He has instilled into me at all events a vehement love of the beautiful. Not with so much labour as the fables have it, is Ceres said to have sought her daughter Proserpine, as I am wont day and night to seek for this idea of the beautiful through all the forms and faces of things (for many are the shapes of things divine) and to follow it leading me on as with certain assured traces.” This is Plato’s voice on the lips of the young Puritan disciple of the “Phædrus,” but it denotes the enthusiasm of his soul and its poetic direction. This Platonic vein, this emotional colour of beauty in his virtue sets Milton’s Puritanism somewhat apart. So also his love of the drama removes him from the historical type of the sect. He

GREAT WRITERS

could not, being a scholar of classical breeding, fail to look on the drama as a noble form, and its Greek examples fed his genius from the Euripidean passages of "Comus" to the "Samson Agonistes" at the very end. But while yet a student at college he had written the tribute to Shakspeare that was first printed in the Second Folio; and in connection with his friend, Lawes, the musician, he tried, though with an anonymity which he endeavoured to preserve, the masque form of the drama, then its popular or at least fashionable phase, in the "Arcades" and on the great scale in the "Comus." This last was really a piece of private theatricals written for the Lord-President of Wales, who had employed Lawes, and acted by his children in the great hall at Ludlow Castle on his inauguration into his office. The substance of the poem, however, which was the praise and defense of chastity, was a very noble form of Puritan feeling in the high sense. It, too, is alive with Platonic philosophy, but this is so inwrought in the poetry that it is not felt by the reader except in its results. The praise of chastity also denotes something exceptional in Milton's temperament, in disclosing which it is necessary to use his own words, but with the more happiness since the passage opens with that remarkable sentence which is the most famous that came from his pen:

"And long it was not after, when I was confirmed in

this opinion, that he, who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem; that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men, or famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and the practice of all that which is praiseworthy. These reasonings, together with a certain niceness of nature, an honest haughtiness and self-esteem, either of what I was or what I might be (which let envy call pride), and lastly that modesty whereof, though not in the title-page, I may be excused to make here some beseeeming profession; all these uniting the supply of their natural aid together kept me still above low descents of mind

Next (for hear me out now, readers), that I may tell you whither my younger feet wandered; I betook me among those lofty fables and romances which recount in solemn cantos the deeds of knighthood founded by our victorious kings, and from hence had in renown over all Christendom. There I read in the oath of every knight that he should defend to the expense of his best blood, or of his life if it so befell him, the honour and chastity of virgin or matron; from whence even then I learnt what a noble virtue chastity sure must be, to the defence of which so many worthies by such a dear adventure of themselves had sworn. . . . So that even these books, which

GREAT WRITERS

to many others have been the fuel of wantonness and loose living, I cannot think how, unless by divine indulgence, proved to me so many incitements, as you have heard, to the love and steadfast observation of that virtue."

In these matters, perhaps, silence is as golden in a Galahad as in a Launcelot, but the openness of Milton in this and other passages, is a part of his nature and belongs to his essential character. The personal feeling is only an instance of the purity that is elemental in his entire genius which in the end became a genius for austerity. But that time was far off, beyond the barrier of twenty years of the fighting that makes all men stern. The gentler Milton of the earlier day, the youth with the passion for purity, the passion for beauty, the passion for perfection in poetry, had no premonition of what was to be, what truly "God had resolved" concerning him; he looked, it can hardly be doubted, for that Virgilian future, while he pursued his studies of the most mellowed art of civilization in the books of Athens, Rome, and Italy, and dreamed the dream of travel, fearful that he had been rash in allowing his friend Lawes to publish the unripe fruit of "Comus."

It was in this spirit that Milton, when thirty years old, made the journey to Italy where he remained more than a year. He must have been heartened by the praise of Sir Henry Wotton, who gave him letters of introduction,

MILTON

saying of "Comus" — "I should much commend the tragical part, if the lyrical did not ravish me with a certain Doric delicacy in your Songs and Odes, whereunto I must plainly confess to have seen yet nothing parallel in our language." He met famous men, Grotius and Galileo, lingered especially at Florence, Rome, Naples, and Venice, made numerous friends among the men of letters and taste, and had the great happiness to be favoured with the acquaintance and warm interest of the aged Manso, the befriender of Tasso in his sad life, and the patron of Marini. It is plain that Milton not only made a good impression, as Manso says, with his "mind, form, grace, face, and morals," but he was socially attractive; notwithstanding his strength of natural reserve and what he calls "haughtiness" in his character, his familiar relations with comrades and elder associates betray real humaneness, and the affectionateness of his single close friendship with Charles Diodati intimates perhaps the sweeter quality of nature by which he bound his Italian acquaintances. He followed Wotton's wise and famous advice — "a close tongue and an open face will go safely over the whole world" — indifferently, it is to be feared; but he came out of Italy safe to Geneva, and so home. One wonders what he brought away really from the Italian beauty of scenery, the ruins and the galleries, but it is a vain curiosity; so far as ap-

GREAT WRITERS

pears, his life in Italy was essentially social, he was interested in the men and their academies, and wrote Italian and Latin verses in their midst, like a dilettante youth; but the great result seems to have been the stir of his mind in response to the appreciation of his talents about him and the forming of a solid and resolved ambition to produce a great poetic work. His own words are important: "Much latelier," he writes, "in the private academies of Italy, whither I was favoured to resort, perceiving that some trifles that I had in memory, composed at under twenty or thereabouts (for the manner is that every one must give some proof of his wit and reading there) met with acceptance above what was looked for; and other things, which I had shifted in scarcity of books and conveniences to patch up amongst them, were received with written encomiums, which the Italian is not forward to bestow on men of this side the Alps; I began thus far to assent both to them and divers of my friends here at home, and not less to an inward prompting which now grew daily upon me, that by labour and intent study (which I take to be my portion in this life) joined with the strong propensity of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to aftertimes as they should not willingly let it die." An epic poem or a tragic drama was to be the form of this attempt, and he listed nigh a hundred subjects for choice, the chief being the

MILTON

British story of Arthur's Knights and the Hebrew myth of Paradise. It might be thought that this width of topic consorts but ill with any theory of "God's resolve" concerning him, and certainly Apollo in his inspiration was not wont to give the priestess a hundred oracles to pick and choose; but if the academic and reflective nature of Milton's muse is thus superficially clear, the selection of the subject of "Paradise Lost" was not really arbitrary, but the choice along which the character of his life and learning and the spirit of the man were felt in self-commanding ways.

Milton had come home because of the threatening aspect of public affairs in the same spirit in which many of our own countrymen returned at the outbreak of the Civil War because it is not fit that a citizen should be abroad (save in her service) when his country is in arms. But he was a private person with no opening into state affairs; so he says very sensibly, "I betook myself to my interrupted studies, trusting the issue of public affairs to God in the first place, and to those to whom the people had committed that charge." Up to this time Milton had depended on paternal support, and his father had been a very good Augustus to him; now he began to earn something, and from undertaking the care of his sister's two young boys, he set up gradually a little private academy of a half-friendly character for the children of families in

his acquaintance. A few boys in a house big enough for himself and his books, many of which he had collected and sent from Venice, and with a garden — he always kept a garden near in his many changes of London residence — and with the schoolmaster's task for his useful employment; this was the outward look of the life which within was brooding the work that the world "would not willingly let die." Milton also signalized his entrance on every-day affairs by taking a wife; strangely enough she was of a broken-down worldly Cavalier family, which was much in debt to his father, and she was but just past seventeen. There was a brief two months of festivity in the house, after which the young bride returned to her family for a visit, and would not come back to her husband till two years later when, in the declining fortune of both the Cavalier cause and the family, a reconciliation was arranged. Meanwhile Milton had found an entrance to the life of the public cause as a pamphleteer; he published in swift succession several of the tracts on the times by which for twenty years he was to be mainly known at home, and to become famous abroad as the chief defender of the English nation in the forum of Europe, and in the composition of which he expended his intellectual energy till the last moment of the lost cause.

The golden age of Milton's life had gone by; the happy home where he had been the light of the house —

MILTON

and how dearly he was cherished is humanly indicated by his father's having two portraits of him in boyhood and youth — was broken up; Charles Diodati, his first and only bosom friend, was dead. Life had entered on a new scene, in which domestic unhappiness, conflict with men, the indignation and bitter edge of prose were in sharp contrast with that early felicity, peace and poetic musing. The change was as deep as life, and in fact amounted to a substitution of intellectual for poetic force as the element of its being. Up to now Milton's thinking had been subsidiary to his art, but henceforward it was for its own sake; he had been a man of letters, he became a man of politics. His interest in ideas was immense, though now it was first apparent. He had a greater intellect than commonly falls to the share even of great poets, and it was of that active sort that makes the practical idealist. The passion for perfection in art which makes the poet, and for purity in life which makes the man, are matters of the private life, but the application of analogous ideas of perfection to the lives of other men and to the state necessarily throws the asserter of them into opposition, and in so far as he strives for their victory he finds oftenest a thorny path. Milton now entered on this career. His practical instinct working through ideas is most simply seen in the things nearest to him. It was no common school that he kept, no hum-

GREAT WRITERS

drum routine that he mumbled over to his boys; there was a curriculum of his own devising and noticeably he saw to it that his boys read more books that had life in them and with a broader reach of modern power, as it then was, than other schoolboys had any chance to get, and he put speed into their acquisition of Latin; quicker work and a wider and more contemporary round of study, and in general the Renaissance ideal of the development of personal power in manifold ways, characterized the education he strove to give. It was, no doubt, the most modern school in Europe, though its pupils were only half a handful. His domestic life was, like the school, a near concern; and he no sooner realized that his young wife had deserted him after two months than he at once declared the extreme heretical doctrine of liberty of divorce and re-marriage in case of the incompatibility of the parties. It was a shocking position to take, in those days, and first brought obloquy upon him, but he stuck to his opinion, and indeed among the hundreds of the sects of those days one may still read of the Miltonists or Divorceers. The key to Milton's intellectual life lies in his Renaissance training, though the fact is obscured by the Puritanical matter of his tracts; personal force, such as he raised to heroic proportions in Satan, was his ideal; personal liberty in all its forms was the thing nearest to his heart. It gave great individuality to

MILTON

his own life. Thus he belonged to no communion, attended no church, and had no prayers at home; his religion must have been very sacred to him, and it suffered no profaning hands; he was true Puritan, full grown, not in the sense of the sectaries of his age but in that which is for all time, the man free from all forms who needs no intermediary with his God except the spiritual Christ. The same proud assertion of individual dignity is the core of the great essay in behalf of a free press, the "Areopagitica," in which he set forth the doctrine of the public toleration of thought and speech, the right of the intellect to be heard, with undying eloquence. Liberty, in one form or another, is the watchword of all his prose; it was then, as it continues to be, the shuttlecock between statecraft and priestcraft, but Milton saw the old Priest in the new Presbyter, and in all ways stood for independence in the individual; by so much the more did he stand for independence in the nation, the liberty of the people to call their rulers to the bar and send the violator of their rights to the block; with the vehement and unabated directness of Demosthenes against Philip, he too thundered against the Stuart line. The name of Cromwell only was known so far and widely abroad as that of this Defender of the People of England. It is this office that gives grandeur to his figure; and no one, not of the race itself, has so much in the thoughts of men

GREAT WRITERS

the sublime character of a Hebrew prophet, the rebuker of kings, the declarer of the eternity of truth, the companion of the thoughts of God. This loftiness felt in Milton's prose is what preserves it; if it is not studded with sentences of abstract wisdom, like Burke's, where ripeness of thought and breadth of phrase combine to make memorable political sayings, it is strewn with passages of high and sublime flow in which ideal principles flame at their whitest heat of conviction. To be the voice of England on a great occasion, such as the death of her king by the judgment of her people, was a memorable destiny; but what makes Milton more remembered is that a hundred times liberty spoke by his lips. He was that man, hateful to all tyrants, a Republican; though under the powerful presence of Cromwell, "our chief of men," he swerved slightly from the line, he came home true and belonged with Vane. He was not a democrat; he was too much imbedded in the Renaissance for that, and valued men for their personal distinction; for the honour and force in them that makes for inequality:

*"Nor do I name of men the common rout
That wandering loose about
Grow up and perish as the summer fly,
Heads without name, no more remembered."*

That is the very trick of aristocracy in thought and accent. Equality, fraternity, were not yet risen stars.

MILTON

Milton's "Ready and Easy Way," which he sent forth as the last arrow when Charles II was almost on the coast, proposed a kind of permanent Grand Council, like that of the Republic of Venice, as the ruling body of the state. Nevertheless, Milton's republicanism, though it was not the democracy of to-day, was the high tide of the principle of freedom in that age; and when the dying roll of the retreating storm was heard in that last passionate remonstrance of Milton, on the eve of the King's landing, there was to be silence till the Marseillaise.

In these years Milton's life took on that harshness of feature, which it retains in tradition, owing to his invective against the enemies of the State, his unhappiness in his children, and perhaps the colour of the name of Puritan. In outward ways it was one of plain habits and personal dignity. He had given up teaching after seven years, and when in a short period the Commonwealth was established he became Foreign Secretary to the Council; it was a good post, well paid, and he held it till the Restoration from his forty-second to his fifty-second year. He received and wrote foreign despatches and was the official intermediary for all ambassadors and envoys, and was thus brought both at the Council Table and in the Hall into habitual association with the heads of State and persons of distinction from abroad. His private fame and character were also such as to attract vis-

its and attention upon his own account. In his appearance and demeanour there must have been the ripened breeding of the scholar and poet whose social art is attested by his Italian travels, together with the matured handsomeness of the man and the personal dignity of the representative of State. His wife had died and he had married again; but after a year of happy wedlock, in this instance, he lost her whose memory he made sacred in the sonnet tenderly recalling her veiled face:

*“ Yet to my fancied sight
Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shined
So clear as in no face with more delight.”*

He may never have seen her face, for before this he had become totally blind in his forty-fifth year. He had continued to perform the duties of his Secretaryship, being led to the Council Room, and there listening, dictating, and composing he went through the necessary business as before. Except for a few sonnets at wide intervals he had entirely discontinued poetry during these twenty years. Dr. Johnson described these sonnets as “cherry-stones,” and it has been well said that this “marks the lowest-point imaginable in criticism of verse.” They are rather stones of David’s sling. That on the massacre in Piedmont is noteworthy as the first blaze of the English muse over the violated liberties of Europe, which Byron and Shelley learned the lightning use of, and whereof

MILTON

Swinburne in our own day flings the revolutionary torch. The sonnets, few as they are, would be a mighty monument for any genius; they have the quality of Michaelangelo. Just before the downfall, Milton seems to have reverted in mind to the predestination of his genius to poetry and that great hope he had indulged on returning from Italy: "that what the greatest and choicest wits of Athens, Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for their country, I, in my proportion, with this over and above of being a Christian, might do for mine." Now the end had come; blind and in hiding, in those months of unloosed revenge, none, the Regicides excepted, was more likely than he to fall a victim; and indeed few who have escaped it came so near as Milton to being hanged. The peril of this shame to England — and such shame there has been in all literatures and nations of civility — was near, but it passed. The "blind old schoolmaster," as he is known from Dryden's lips, lived on in obscurity and humbleness, though a few friends still remembered him and showed him attention, and distinction still clung to his figure. Life, it must have seemed, was done for him. Then he turned to the unbroken meditation of that poem which for two years had employed his thoughts at times, and in three years more of lonely musing carried it to completion. A new age of literature had come in, and new men,

strangers to all that had fashioned the men of old in greatness and him, the last of them; but the old age should yet lift one towering peak to heaven, before it subsided to the levels of the eighteenth century. "Paradise Lost" was this last and belated birth of the greatest English age.

The opposition between the earlier and the later poetry of Milton is very great, and is the more marked because of the barrenness of his middle life in verse. The liquid flow, the beauty of surface locking in mosaic sweet sights and harmonies of the natural world, the mellowness of idyllic and elegaic art, the crystal purity of the air of garden and grove as in some northern Italian night — all these and the like are the traits of his poetic youth; but in the works of his age there is something that dwarfs such qualities and makes natural the designation of the earlier verse as his minor poems. The reason of the difference is, I think, the expansion of Milton's intellectual powers which took place on his entrance into public debate, and the strength they acquired in that Herculean labour of the mind stretched to its utmost of practical force and mastery for twenty years of unremitted strain. "Paradise Lost" is a great poem of the intellect as well as of the imagination. Milton, after a period of wavering, had finally chosen the form of an epic, built on the lines of classical tradition, with the myth of Eden for its central story; the origin

MILTON

and destiny of the soul and the meaning of its course in history was the real theme. The subject was well chosen, and fulfilled the desirable though not essential condition for a work of national appeal in that it was and had long been familiar to the people; the material was at least as well known to the English, in its main outlines, as the myths of the gods on which the Attic tragedians had wrought had been known to the Athenians. Yet it is the decadence of interest in the subject-matter which is now most pointed to as impairing the permanent appeal of the poem. An epic which is in the third century of its victorious power need not fear any displacement. Its childhood myth of the race, its crude science, its antiquated theology, may all be granted, and it is easy to find in its necessary conventions, which belong to it as a work of limited art, something awkward and irrational, even petty and ridiculous to the mind's eye; but the attack along these lines is successful only when conducted against details; the poem in its wholeness retains an overwhelming power. It is conceived in three movements; the first is the Titan struggle of the rebellious angels; the second is the Eden bower: the third is the creation of the world with its pendant panorama of human history. Of these three subjects the first yields the most majestic sight of that other world of Hades which the tragic imagination of man in the great-

est poets has essayed to picture in all times; the second gives the most charming rendering of that Bower of Bliss which has also been so often attempted, and the third presents the most nobly impressive story of the birth of our universe that is to be found in poetry. It is not necessary that the mind should cling to the actuality of these scenes and events any more than to the siege of Troy or the voyage of Æneas; if they have imaginary reality — even if they have only that — it is all the truth that poetry seeks and is sufficient to interest men forever. If Adam be as real as Deucalion, and Satan as Enceladus and Prometheus, the only question that remains is with respect to the relative dignity and power of the myth to satisfy the mind in its effort to picture by a symbol — since it cannot know — the secret of its birth, suffering and destiny. If “Paradise Lost” be looked at in this way as only a hypothesis of the imagination, it yet remains the loftiest flight of the mind of man in that region of what is to be only spiritually conceived. It is here that it makes its long and powerful appeal to masses of readers, and remains a poem of the English nation; critics endeavour to empty it of the content of meaning of which it is full, and to leave only the style by which alone, they will have it, the poem survives; but my own mind, I know — and in this I cannot be singular — still holds to the substance as the true poem, indifferent to the fate of

MILTON

the Hebrew myth, of Puritan theology or Darwinian descent, or any other of those matters of contemporaneity which are forever tossed in men's minds. It is possible, perhaps, to trace the operation of some of the elements in the poem, which are not for an age, but for all time.

One the most salutary uses of great poetry is to give a scale of life. Wordsworth was led by the character of his genius to observe how the continual presence of grand natural features in the landscape and the habitual sight of the processes of nature's life fulfill this function for those who live in communion with them, and give to human life a setting and perspective. The reflection of the Greeks that the dramatic representation of tragic changes of fortune in the lives of the great and powerful imposed on the spectators a truer estimate of their own share of trial in life, is an analogous thought. But the soul grows in knowledge of itself not only by these humbling influences of contrast with the grandeur of nature and tragic calamity; it expands through all ideas that raise its sense of power however excited, and especially that power which is lodged in its own being. "Paradise Lost" performs this service, with great efficiency and in diverse ways. In what poem is the infinity of the universe so sensibly present, merely in the physical sphere? It is true that Milton conceives it on the ancient Ptolemaic system instead of the Copernican; but there is the sense

GREAT WRITERS

of infinity in either, and so unimportant is this scientific error in the effect that the ordinary man has to be told it before he finds it out, while the localizing of heaven and hell beyond gives the impression of unlimited spaciousness and the endless reach of the world of being quite in the modern manner. In comparison with Shelley's scientifically orthodox representation of the stellar universe in "Queen Mab," Milton's is more sublime, more true to the idea of infinity, in that it is bordered on by the eternal world and held within the compass of human comprehension with no loss to its majestic beauty as a cluster of celestial orbs without number for multitude. What poem, again, so succeeds in realizing to the mind superhuman power, personal force raised to the utmost imaginable height, not only in the magnificent example of Satan, but in his angelic peers, Uriel and Gabriel, even in the young angels, Ithuriel and Zephron, whom the fiend found invincible? But the infinity which most shines in the poem is not material or personal, not in the universe or the protagonists of the battle that was fought "out of space, out of time;" the infinity is that of man himself as a soul in which issues of eternity converge, about which play mysterious agencies of evil and good, for which in its unknown course celestial powers care; that infinity which in the soul itself is the very ground of being of the Christian religion. The soul,

MILTON

weaving this legend of itself from its far prehistoric dawn, fashioned this wonderful Eden dream; the scenes and events, imbedded in tradition and the life of historical ages, long and continuously in the human consciousness, must have deep affinities with the nature of the soul which in them has incarnated its intuitions, cast its sense of spiritual fact, pictured its beliefs; in a word, this myth embroidered on the hem of the seamless garment of truth is all the memory the soul has of its own un-earthly history. The particular actuality of the links of the legend, and even the form of the elements of thought it uses, are immaterial; for the things of the spirit can only be symbolically shown. Genesis and Geneva may be alike disregarded; science and dogma wholly apart, there remains in the myth the long enduring substance of past experience and conviction stored in the race, however to be more broadly interpreted in the future. If the tenet that "in Adam all men sinned" loses its ancient power, it is at least an earlier reading of that solidarity of humanity which is one of the master-truths of the democracy; if the damnation of the angels is repulsive to humanitarianism, it no less reflects the sense of struggle with the Evil Principle which is a fact of the universal consciousness of mankind, and affirms the final triumph of the Good which is an element unshaken in human faith; if the angelic guard round a pre-doomed

[101]

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

GREAT WRITERS

Paradise seems folly to the reason, it yet does shadow forth the strange double-sense in man of a heavenly guardianship and its mysterious failure to protect the soul in life. But few readers need to consider the matter so curiously as this. Every one, who opens the poem, finds mirrored there the soul in its infinite and eternal nature, and the mystery of its source and destiny set forth with an imaginative definiteness of vision, as nowhere else. The story is displayed with unexampled grandeur in the scenes, in the wasted gloom of hell, in the abyss of chaos, in the freshly created universe of light, upon the battle-
plains of heaven; the characters are ennobled to the height of what is possible in faculty and prowess, in form and moving not inferior to the gods, eloquent in speech, majestic in action, each great in his own resolve; every element of epic power and loveliness, that the practice of elder poets had handled, is employed — whole armies in array, individual conflict, the bower of love, the tale of creation, the panorama of history, the pit, the council, set forth in all the modes of oratory, dialogue, narrative, apostrophe and idyl, and all in an unrivalled balance and harmony of the parts. The Hebraic solemnity and directness, the Pindaric loftiness of flight, yet so absorbed into Milton's inspiration as to be his own and personal to him, give to the poem that quality that it holds unshared with any other epic — sublimity; this is

MILTON

the instinctive and also the deliberate judgment of all men — it is a sublime poem. If I were to sum up in a single expression the immediate power of “Paradise Lost” over men, I should say that no poem so dilates the mind; by so doing it gives a scale to life — the scale of infinity.

“Paradise Lost” is not a modern poem; and I have dwelt elsewhere, perhaps too exclusively, on the important ways in which it departs from modern sympathy; like all great works of imagination in literature it looks on human affairs with a reverted gaze, for such works are climaxes of past thought and passion in centuries and civilization. But neither is it a Renaissance and Reformation poem, any more than the “Divine Comedy” is a mediæval poem. There are cantos of Dante, quite as theologically dead and more unintelligible than Milton’s dry tracts. Such elements of hardened matter from which the fire has gone are found in all the greatest compositions. The poem remains universal, not for an age but for all time, because it is thus a poem of the soul and its mystery, and sets forth under an intelligible formula of thought and history and in images of becoming grandeur and splendour that particular legend of the soul which has been the historical framework of spiritual piety in Christian ages and still appeals by countless tendrils of memory, custom and aspiration to men born Christians; it fills imaginatively what is otherwise

GREAT WRITERS

a void, "peoples the lone infinite," as no other secular work has done. It is thus that, as I said, it neighbours the Bible in men's thoughts; and not only does it do this by its matter, but also by its style. The Bible is the standard of perfection in English writing; but the same influence which flows from it upon the listening mind, and is felt as the unapproached perfection of prose speech in language and cadence by the host of the common people in congregations, also flows from Milton's verse in the region of poetry; every one, however unlearned in literature, feels that here is a standard of perfection. It is a fit and crowning excellence; but the style is no more all of Milton than it is all of Isaiah or St. John. The people cannot escape great style, as all oratory shows; neither can they escape great poetry. The power of the highest is always greatest upon the lowest; it is this which makes a national poem possible; this sent Homer with all Greek ships, Virgil with all Roman eagles, Milton with all English Bibles through the world.

"Paradise Lost" is the greatest of Milton's works because his powers are there in true balance, intellect and imagination in equal fellowship, with the lesser graces of poetry (such as distinguished his early verse) not in neglect. As he grew rapidly old, his expression became bare and austere; in "Paradise Regained" and "Samson Agonistes" intellectual power seems to transcend and

MILTON

perhaps depress the imaginative — the balance is disturbed. They have the severity of outline and surface that belong to the peak. They were the work of the last years, when one thinks of Milton and sees him in the most human way, comes near to him as a natural creature, an old man. One youth there was who came to him now, like the boys he used to teach, and had lessons from him and talk, in return for which he wrote at Milton's dictation. His daughters had left him; a third wife, whom he married late, took kindly care of him; friends visited him. He would sit outside the door in the sun, wrapped in a coarse grey cloth coat. The undying portrait of him is that reported by the painter, Richardson, from an aged clergyman who called on him. "He found him in a small house, he thinks but one room on a floor. In that, up one pair of stairs, which was hung with a rusty green, he found John Milton sitting in an elbow-chair, black clothes and neat enough; pale but not cadaverous; his hands and fingers gouty, and with chalk stones. Among other discourse he expressed himself to this purpose, 'that, was he free from the pain this gave him, his blindness would be tolerable.'" This was the old age appointed for the fair youth of forty years before, in whom the beauty of the Renaissance seemed to have taken on ideal form, on the eve of the Italian journey; to this end he had brought his boyhood passion for beauty, purity

GREAT WRITERS

and perfection through a life of intellectual conflict to a consummation that gave him kinship with the sterner rather than the softer brothers of his art, with Pindar and Æschylus and the prophets of old rather than Euripides and the mild Italian genius; it is hard to reconcile the two, to find in the old man the youth. It is commonly thought that in the tragedy of "Samson" he had his own fortune in mind, and doubtless he drew sympathetic inspiration from his own position in realizing that of Samson in defeat. But his worn spirit seems to have accepted defeat without that despair of life which in so fiery tempered a soul, so great in faculty, might well be feared. It may be that his faith was equal to that birth of patience, which is the crown of life long lived, and the capacity for which he showed in promise in his birthday sonnet in youth and in thought in his sonnet on his blindness. It is at least noticeable that the last lines of "Samson" look to fuller life, not death, and are words of promise and submission, of growth as well as of faith:

*"All is best, though we oft doubt
What the unsearchable dispose
Of highest wisdom brings about,
And ever best found in the close.*

* * * * *

*His servants He, with new acquist
Of true experience from this great event,
With peace and consolation hath dismissed,
And calm of mind, all passion spent."*

MILTON

In this high mood, one hopes, Milton took farewell of the world as of the Muse; he died at almost sixty-six years of age, leaving to mankind a life that has been the inspiration of liberty, and these few rolls of immortal verse.



Great Writers

IV



VIRGIL

Virgil is that poet whose verse has had most power in the world. He was the poet of Rome, and concentrated in his genius its imperial star; so long as that ruled the old Mediterranean world, with the great northwest and eastern hinterlands, Virgil summed its glory for the human populations that fledged away in that vast basin; in a world forever mightily changing his solitary pre-eminence was one unchanging thing, dimmed only as the empire itself faded. His memory illumined the Dark Ages. He rose again as the morning star of the Latin races. He penetrated the reborn culture of Europe with the persistency and pervasiveness of Latinity itself; not only was knowledge of his works as wide-spread as education, but his influence on the artistic temperament of literatures, the style of authors and even the characters of men in their comprehension of the largeness of life, was subtle and profound, and was the more ample in

GREAT WRITERS

proportion to the nearness of the new nations to the direct descent of civilization. He, more than any other poet, has been a part of the intellectual life of Europe alike by length of sway and by the multitude of minds he touched in all generations; and, among the Latin races, he is still the climax of their genius, for charm and dignity, for art and the profound substance of his matter, and for its serious inclusiveness of human life. Of no other poet can it be said that his lines are a part of the biography of the great, of emperors like Augustus and Hadrian, of fathers like Jerome and Augustine, of preachers like Savonarola, churchmen like Fenelon, statesmen like Pitt and Burke; and among the host of humble scholars, of schoolmasters, the power he has held in their bosoms is as remarkable for its personal intimacy as for its universal embrace. No fame so majestic has been cherished with a love so tender. Virgil thus blends in a marvellous manner the authority of a classic with the direct appeal to life.

It belongs to the sense of familiar companionship which Virgil's verse exhales that some shadows of his personality survive, slight but sufficient for memory and affection. He was the son of a small farmer, in the province of North Italy, of whom no more is known than that he wished to give his child the best education then to be had. We first see him, who was to be so great a poet, as

VIRGIL

the slender tall schoolboy at Cremona and Milan, with the rusticity of manner which he never laid aside. He studied also at Rome, in his youth, and found patrician friends among his mates. He made his way later with men of great affairs, and notwithstanding the shyness of his heart and the awkwardness of his manners they found something to prize in him by some charm the Muses shed, loved him, petted and praised him, and gave him a fortune, a house at Rome, near Maecenas' garden, which he seldom used, and two country homes at Naples and Nola, where he loved to live in the soft Campanian air; there, except for sojourns in Sicily and pleasant travel in the Greek cities and along the islands, he passed those meditative years of privacy in which his self-distrustful and long-brooding genius slowly matured its eternal work; there, too, as he desired, at Naples, over by the hill of Posilippo, his ashes were laid to rest in that pleasant city's soil, which still keeps the tradition of his tomb. He was happy in the protecting affection of his friends, and also in the honour of the world which rose to him as to Augustus when he entered the theatre, and in the power of lifelong labour in his art undiminished by an hour wasted on inferior things. In all outward ways his life was the most fortunate recorded in literature; and it is good to know that the world was gentle to one of those delicate spirits who, usually with how

different a fate, bring it gifts from eternity. In the memory of Virgil there is no bitterness of regret for the words of unkindness or the blows of adversity; he lived peacefully and in the habitual enjoyment of some of the fairest gifts of life.

Nowhere so much as in those works which seem most independent of the power of time, which escape from their own age, their native country and race, and enter upon a cycle of memory so vast that they are fitly named the stars of the intellectual firmament, is it needful to define their moment, to understand the nest of their conception, the law of their creation, the nature of their first appeal to men, in a word their contemporaneity. The moment of Virgil is declared plainly in the "Eclogues." They are little poems, the laboured trifles of his 'prentice hand; but in them, like the oak in the acorn there is in miniature all Virgil; both the man and his work are there like a preconception. The teachableness of Virgil is his prime character, and shines in his youth. He woke to the past as simply as a child opens its eyes to the dancing sunlight of the world, and he took it in directly as something belonging to him. He made speed to enter on his inheritance; and for him this heritage in its special form was the glory of Greek literature. The imaginative interpretation of the world stored in a thousand years of Greek poetry was the food of his heart. Thus it came

VIRGIL

about that he did not begin to write in a way discovered and worked out merely by himself, but imitated, as it is said, Theocritus the Syracusan, the chief Greek master of pastoral verse. He could not have had better fortune. For a youth unacquainted with experience the artificial mode of life which the pastoral presents as its framework of incident and song is itself favourable, since its requirements of accurate representation of reality are less stringent; and, especially, its small scale enforces attention to detail and encourages perfection of phrase, line and image in the workmanship and condensation in the matter, while its variety of description, dialogue and inserted song and its blend of lyric and dramatic moods give scope to a mind experimenting as it learns. It is for this reason that so many of the world's great poets in their youth have tried their wings in these numbers, brief, composite, academic, so well fitted for the exercise of growing talents, already touched with scholarship, in a world not too real to be lightly held nor so fantastic as to preclude truth of feeling. Virgil derived the proper good from the imitation of a great master by developing through it his native power. Theocritus remained the master-singer of the idyl; but before the different genius of Virgil passed on to its own toils, he had left the sweetness of his youth here in the pastoral like a perfume forever.

GREAT WRITERS

The poetic life of Virgil, however, in these years was more profound than this. He was not merely training his genius in certain external modes of expression; he was unfolding his soul. Form was the Greek gift to Virgil; not only that form which exists in the outer structure of line and melody or within the verse in its logic of emotion and event, but form which has power to cast the mind itself in predetermined lines of feeling and action, of taste, of choice, of temperament, and finds utterance in that beauty of the soul which is precedent to all verse. Form in its religious moods has this power to possess and shape the souls of men, as is familiarly seen; and so artistic form, alive and bodied in the lovely and ancient Greek tradition, seized Virgil in the spirit and fashioned him; he was its child as the novice is the spiritual son of St. Francis. The opposition between Theocritus and Virgil lies in this: in Theocritus, life puts on the forms of art; in Virgil art puts on the forms of life. In the Syracusan idyls there is objective beauty—pictures idealized and detached from life; in the Mantuan “Eclogues” one feels rather the presence of a beautiful soul to which art has given the gift of tongues to speak to all men. This deep intimate compelling mastery of the Greek spirit over all that was artistic in Virgil shaped him almost in his essential being; he was Hellenized as by a second birth. It was characteristic

VIRGIL

of him to yield to the will of life, and he yielded happily to the Greek forms of imagination, for he found in this obedience that yoke in which alone everlasting freedoms lie and the power of a free soul; it released his personality as if by some divine and creative touch. This presence of Virgil in his verse is elementary. He was a lover, and through love disengaged from life its moment of beauty, of sentiment, of millennial hope; but this beauty, sentiment and hope are seen under that almost atmospheric charm which has coined for itself the name Virgilian and is breathed from himself. It is not for what these eclogues contain of Theocritus that they have been dear to the poets of all lands, any more than it is for what the youthful lines of Spenser and Milton contain of these eclogues that the English breathings of the pastoral are dear; it is because they express with great purity and sweetness the genius of Virgil in its tender age.

If any one finds in the eclogues only the echo of Theocritus, he is wide of the mark; his ear is not set to the ringing of the master-melody in their song. The poets used the same instrument, and the younger learned its use from the elder; but each employed it with a difference, and this difference is a gulf of ages between them and an opposition in the spring and impulse of poetry. Art is not life, but is evoked from life. Theo-

critus held the mirror to life, but its image in his verse though more beautiful is still a thing of the external world; he stands outside what he depicts and renders it for its own sake. Virgil projected himself into life, and is the centre of the world he expresses; he uses it to illustrate his own personality, to body forth his own various loves of beauty, nature, sentiment, romance, aspiration, to clothe with the forms of life that soul which art had shaped in him. He was still, though thirty, only a half-boyish lover of books and nature and a few friends, and the world he lived in was but little known to him; the eclogues with the personality of autobiography disclose this young scholar in his world. Virgil's world, too, like the temperamental drift of his art, is different from that of Theocritus; it is one more diversified, more actual and contemporaneous even; it is a Roman, Italian, proconsular world. He thinks of Actium and Parthia as we to-day think of Santiago and the Philippines. His landscape has the face and profile of familiar haunts; his shepherds have the features of his own rustics; his interests are his own local and temporal affairs. The pastoral Arcadia is a convention by means of which the encumbrances of time and place and persons and much matter of fact are gotten rid of; but under its clear veil which softens the unimportant, stand undisguised the men and events, the sentiment, the friendships, the

VIRGIL

scenes, the recreations, all the loves of the young poet from the humblest and tenderest up to the hope of all the world which he in those first years sounded for eternal memory as none before or since has sung the strain. Such is the Roman substance, personal, Italian, imperial, of it all, notwithstanding the superficial artifice of the poetic form.

Roman, too, was the seriousness of the young poet in his art. He and his fellow poets of the age were in literature provincials whose metropolis was Greek letters. They set themselves to the patriotic task of bringing the Greek muses to Latium where Aeneas had brought the Trojan gods, and creating in Latin something as near the Greek poetry as they could accomplish, and by very obviously, often direct, imitative means. They were zealous in the work; all were serious in it, however light the touch or the topic they strove to transplant to their own language and world. Virgil was such a provincial, though Greek art was itself refined in passing through his temperament; and he had such seriousness of mind. To compare great things with small, he was not unlike the young Longfellow in America who was avid of all the literatures of Europe and assimilated the poetic tradition of the thousand years preceding his birth, and who also strove with like seriousness to compass something like that in his own new land; and like Virgil, he too, in after life created for his country its native romance and

GREAT WRITERS

primitive sentiment, giving to its desert nakedness an ascribed and imputed poetry. The Roman moment, also, in the largest way, was not unlike our own. Virgil was born in a dawning age; for him, as for us, life had been long lived in the world, there was antiquity, the thousand years of literature, and vanishing religions; Egypt was, perhaps, even more a monument of the Unknown Death than to-day; but with the spread of the power of Rome, which was then what the spread of liberty now is, a new age was at hand. Law and peace, which were the other names of Rome, had the world in their grasp, and were conquering far outward along its dark barbaric edges even to Britain "sundered once from all the human race." It was then that Virgil, "in the foremost files of time," sang in his youth that eclogue, the "Pollio" which is the greatest hymn of antiquity, if not of all time, and won for himself, though a pagan, a place among the saints of the Church:

Magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo.

The line has the swell of the "Gloria." Thus early, thus fundamental by virtue of its earliness, arose in him and mingled with his genius that temperament of world-hope, not the diminutive Arcadian dream of a valley or distant islands of the blessed, but world-hope mighty as the world, on the great scale of universal sympathy for man-

VIRGIL

kind, which was one of the authentic signs of a new time. It was the secular hour of the founding of the Empire; it was the spiritual hour of the birth of Christ; and its presence was in the young poet's heart. A mighty voice, too, had before now been heard in Rome, the voice of one crying in the wilderness of the dethroned gods, a man so great that he could endure the longest probation of any of the poets of mankind and wait nineteen centuries for the fullness of his fame — Lucretius. Virgil heard the voice, and stored it in his heart, and meditated upon it; but the time was not yet come. It was the eve of a great past, the dawn of a great future; and the further one penetrates the verse, the more clearly stands out this youthful figure with the radiance of the world's new morning in his face.

The "Eclogues," obeying the law of all beautiful things, have gathered beauty from the lapse of time. Some light streams back upon them from the later glory of Virgil, and they have that increase of charm which belongs to things that have been long loved; the lines, too, like shells, are full of vocal memories. For one who knows them well and knows the poets, they are a nest of the singing birds of all lands; as he reads, voices of Italy, France and England blend with the familiar lines, and a choiring vision rises before him of the world's poets in their youth framing their lips to the smooth-sliding syl-

lables; for the eclogues have been deeply cherished. They are loved chiefly, however, because the young Virgil is seen in them, as in the palaestra of his art before he had put on his singing-robcs, with that sweet teachableness, that yielding and hospitable mind, out of which was to come, to bless him and the world, the wide receptivity of his spirit, the rich assimilation, the accumulated power of imagination in the race, already held in the grasp of his genius like Ithuriel's spear. Rome and Athens, the light and majesty of the world, were married in his blood; and though he bore as yet only the rustic reed, here in the adolescence of genius was the form of him who was to hand down by descent the antique vigour to the modern world. Virgil became the great reconciler in his own inherited world, the great mediator between antiquity and Christendom; he maintained in poetry, equally with Plato in philosophy, the unbroken continuity of the human spirit; but before entering on these great offices and as preliminary to them he was first of all and by instinct a great lover — a greater lover than Dante — and here in the first friendly affections of the senses melting with the world, of the heart blending with other lives, of the mind breathing the universal hope of all, is this lover in the bud — he, who was to be the greatest lover in all the world of all things beautiful, strong, tender, pitiful, sad, and fated.

VIRGIL

There was another scope, a different fibre in the "Georgics," the fruit of his seven years' toil in early manhood. His genius had been powerfully condensed; the matter of the song was as firmly organized as it was richly diversified; the whole, scarcely two thousand lines in all, was a great single poem. The sense of nationality, no longer diffused and dispersed, burns at the centre as its nucleus and feeding flame. The work, though small in scale is monumental in effect; it bears the Roman birthmark in its practical purpose to share in the restoration of the agricultural life, and in the author's dedication of his powers to public spirit. It was characteristic of Virgil to require reality in his subject-matter, and a present hour; contemporaneousness presided in the inception and purpose of all he did; however far he might range, he brought all home to amplify that moment of Rome in which he lived. More than any other of the poets of mankind he used the poetic art to idealize, to exalt and to enrich the nation's consciousness; and, through singleness of mind and comprehensiveness of effort, he became the most national of all poets. As the world had been given to Rome to rule, Rome had been given to him to be the Empire of his song; this was his destiny. His genius did not expand suddenly and at once to so vast a sphere; but as is the case with all men who accumulate greatness as if by a process of nature, hum-

bler impulses and lesser tasks conducted him upon his way. He would tell the story of Italy — that was the phase under which Rome first appealed to him. It was as if some one of our own poets had chosen to write an idyl of the old free life of New England, in the days before national unity and American destiny had come to fullness in his heart. With unerring instinct, in choosing his theme, he struck straight at the fundamental Roman interest, the land, the soil; but not yet imperializing, he seized this interest not in its foreign form of land-hunger which is the impulse of all empire, but in its primitive form of the home-domain, “the mighty mother of men and fruits,” that Italy which was Rome’s birthright. He thought of the land, too, not as our nature-poets do in modern days as a description of contour and colour and changes of the weather, the magic of the senses, but primitively as the dwelling place of the race and the element of its labours. Toil; that, too, was a Roman idea, and he yoked it with the land in a Roman way; for he saw human life on the soil as an arduous and unremitting warfare with the stubborn obduracy of nature, who being subdued, nevertheless, became beneficent, rejoicing in her captivity, and rewarded her conqueror with the harvest of the earth and its loveliness, with the external blessings of the gods and with moral boons of inward excellence stored in the char-

VIRGIL

acters of men by this discipline of the perennial task of life.

The "Georgics" is the story of this perennial task. In its original and parent form no more than an almanac, a manual of the planting of crops, the raising of cattle and the tending of bees, it grew in Virgil's mind to be a poem of the sacred year. Virgil was by instinct and temperament a ritualist. The regularity inherent in times and seasons and all ceremonial, the solemnity belonging to all rites, the presence of the abstract and hidden in their significance, were things profoundly Roman and responded to what was by race deeply implanted in his nature. The round of the seasons in their connection with agricultural life was in his eyes a ritual of the year, the presence and action of a natural religion. The dependence of man on nature always plays a great part in religious life; even now when that dependence is less definitely felt than in primitive times it is at birth, marriage and death, the great moments of nature, that religion has its common and vital impact on the general life; and in the primitive conditions, set forth in this poem, nature might seem herself to appoint the sacred days of the gods both for prayer and for thanksgiving, to order the festivals in their course and to prescribe the peculiar service for the hour, month after month, in annual revolution. The needs of each season and the pur-

suits appropriate to it determined the active duties of man, and these drew after them the due religious practices consecrated by use and wont; and, in the issue of all, the blessings of the divine gods crowned the labour with a present reward. Natural piety could not have a simpler being than this. The mystery of the world which envelopes all life-processes on the earth has always overhung the out-of-doors people with some grandeur in the elements, with stars and winds and waves; in living near to nature, they seem, by virtue of being lost and unprotected there, to reach out to the unknown in habitual ways. Virgil felt this mystery after a different fashion; he knew it in the forms of old mythology that Greek imagination had put on in the divine presence, and also in the forms of new science that Greek intellect had put forth in attempting a rational conception of nature as a thing subject to human knowledge. He was not disturbed by this double possession of imagination and rational intuition; that teachable, that yielding and hospitable mind, by its own nature made him in his self-expression a representative poet; he gave out life in its wholeness. This sacred year, with its ritual of work and and worship, drew his eyes upon it, as a thing of outward beauty, and first gave up to his gaze, first of men, that enveloping charm of the land and its life which is now the world's thought of Italy; this year, too, with its

VIRGIL

antique usages, as old, perhaps, as the tilled soil itself, recurring in their seasons as the sun rose in the zodiac, engaged his affections by which he was bound to all things of reverence, age and piety, and none more than he realized in his heart both their divine and human appeal; and, with all this, awoke, too, the philosophic mind, fed from later fountains, and he flung round this ancient Italy, humanized by long life upon its soil, that large horizon of the intellect, in which his own time was beginning to live.

In such ways as these the poem which was begun as a manual of the farm's task-work came from Virgil's hands so touched with visible beauty, old religious association, the mythology and science of the Mediterranean world and his own loves for all these, that it was, without fiction, an incarnate Italy. He had embodied in his verse the land itself with all its loveliness, then as it is to-day, a land long lived in, with history, legend and ruins of a storied past reaching back into the unknown ages; he had set forth its characteristic life, the human product of the soil, as a thing so sharing in the simplicities of nature and what is divinely primitive as to make it seem the eternal model of what the life of man on earth should be, under the dispensation of labour, yet enveloped in the kindly agencies of sun and rain, springtide and summer heat and mellowing falls, the birth and rebirth

of all things in the revolution of the year — a life which was itself religion, a round of duty, prayer and praise; and he had evoked from this land and the life there lived in the plains and uplands that abstract Italy, the eldest of the modern nations, in unveiling whom he may almost be said to have created the mother-land. It is the same Italy, then and now; the stream of Italian patriotism still mounts to the hymn of the second Georgic as its fountainhead. There Italy is first seen clothed with the divinity that a land identified with a race and a renown takes on in the hearts of its children. Virgil seized the fact in its moment, with that revelation of the actual which the highest poetry exists to achieve. He sees Italy as the centre of the world, with other lands antique or barbarous lying on the sea about and beyond her, each with its just distance and colouring and place in the Mediterranean world, which is her sphere, but subject and tributary to her unenvious supremacy in fertility and men and fame. The miracle is the perfection with which Virgil expresses this security in happiness, beauty and power, this unclouded felicity of fortune, this ordered peace, while distant clouds of war and menace whirl only on the far confines of the scene.

He had prepared himself with wonderful thoroughness for the work; a broad base of scholarship lies under it, and for the didactic substance he had brought all Greek

VIRGIL

and Roman knowledge, and something even from Carthage, to contribute to its truth, precision and fulness; but it was rather by his cultural knowledge, which he used in heightening and expanding the theme to its true proportions, that he regenerated and transformed the matter of the verse and made the rural scene into the glory of Italy. The wealth of this preparation, and his seven years' toil, may seem disproportionate to the result in a poem so brief, but only to those who do not know that, the scale of the matter being allowed for, the power of a poem is in inverse proportion to its length. He used for his artistic method a selective, partial description, subordinating individuality and detail to social and general presentation, and he employed episode, suggestion and the emphasis that lies in enthusiasm to enlarge the theme and qualify it with greatness; in particular, he intended no exhaustion of the subject but only of the feeling of the subject, which is the method of great poetry, and hence come the rapidity, the variety, the completeness of impression which are the most obvious traits of the changeful lines. The "Georgics," most of all, reveals the master of the poetic art; and in a work somewhat limited by its choice of one though a great and enduring phase of human life and also by its national inspiration and its attachment to a particular social moment, the mind has leisure to notice the more its artistic

modes, the choice and ordering of the material, the colours of rhetoric, the edge and immobility of style ever fresh and everlasting as sculpture, the wealth of mosaic, the pictorial, sententious and eclectic compositeness, the elaboration of the poem's beauty in the whole and in detail. It is full of a poet's choices; and, though popular with the cultivated class to which it was addressed, is essentially a poet's poem. True to himself, the stuff which Virgil worked in was his own nature; out of his heart brooding on the beauty of the visible world about him, on the picture of its human labours and the imperial care conserving all these things in happy and lasting peace, came the vision shaped and coloured and idealized by his sympathies with man's life, his affections for the things of old time, his hopes in the present. The "Georgics" in a land of patriots and poets is still the unrivalled monument of the first poet-lover of Italy.

The "Aeneid," Virgil's last and greatest work, is a world-poem. It is one of that splendid cluster of world-poems, which by the fewness of their number, the singleness of their glory, and the great intervals of time that separate them, have, of all man's works most infinitude; though time attacks them, they survive like the pyramids; they are man's Bibles on the side that he turns to the human, like the Scriptures on the side that he turns to the divine. The distinctive feature of the "Aeneid" is

VIRGIL

the arc of time it covers, the burden of time it supports. After that song of Italy, of the land and the life, the genius of Virgil struck a deeper compass of reality and seized the theme at its heart. "Utter my toiling power," said Rome. The tale of the wanderings of Aeneas and how he brought the Trojan gods to Latium is only the fable; over and beyond all the character and event which it contains, and including these like an atmosphere, it is a symbol of the massive labour of the seven centuries that had for their crown and climax the pacified Augustan world.

Tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem.

This massive labour, this toiling power, is the theme. It is not the Homeric world; no ten years' foray, brilliant with Greek personality, in the dawn of history; no passionate boy, though the most splendid of all Alexanders, great in his sulking wrath, his comrade-love and his battle-glory; no chieftains parleying in the council and warriors rushing in the field; not these. It is the Virgilian world — Rome at the summit of her Empire, rising from those seven centuries of interminable strain. Rome in the verse is its creative impulse, and governs the poem in its whole and in its parts. The sense of past time, too, always so strong in Virgil, is never relaxed. The "Aeneid" is the book of an old world.

GREAT WRITERS

Aeneas is, in his character, Rome concentrated — a man set against the world; and in him, too, is that perspective of the past. He has outlived his personal life; his city is in ashes, his wife is dead; there remains nothing for himself, only to live for others, to obey the will of the gods, devotion to a public end. He is characterized by patience, in which his piety is absorbed — that patience which alike to the Pagan and the Christian world, to the Oriental and the Occidental mind, is the greatest virtue of man, and was the state virtue of Rome; to endure, however distant the goal, however frequent the defeat, however adverse men and fortune and the gods. The “Aeneid” is the book of victory deferred, as imperial Rome, to one looking backward on her past, was the last fruit of time, the late issue of long and perilous struggle through generations. Toil, which in the song of Italy was linked with the land, is here fused with the power of empire; but it is toil — the same Roman idea, though more informed with grandeur, and it draws with it the same rule of life, obedience, though more set forth with the stern absoluteness that belonged to Roman discipline. If Aeneas offends romantic sentiment by deserting Dido at Carthage, he conformed thereby to the Roman ideal of right in some of its deepest foundations; and even in the modern view, it may be suspected that if in place of the wing-heeled

VIRGIL

Mercury there had been some Hebrew prophet rebuking an erring David, the sympathy of the reader might run truer with the thoughts of Virgil. Rome would not tolerate the noblest of Antonys forgetting empire in passion for a woman; and Acneas, in abandoning Dido, was the reverse of Antony, and measured to the Roman rule of life. Aeneas gains, and is truly seen, in proportion as the mind is free from the allurements of individuality, free from the worship of the ungovernable human power in life, and all that makes against the ideal of patience, obedience and rule; the grandeur of the individual is found in Mezentius and Turnus, creatures of self-will opposed to the will of heaven, and herein justly doomed to perish; if these latter seem the true heroes, it is as Satan is sometimes, and perhaps popularly, regarded as the hero of Milton, but to Milton Satan was infernal as to Virgil Turnus was impious. Aeneas stands at the opposite pole of conduct; and if he shares the defective attraction which the typical Roman character historically discloses, he the more illustrates that efficient power in life, of which the sense greatens as time clarifies the mind of the ardours of youth, whether in men or nations; for the ideal implanted in him, like every part of the poem, bears the mark of a world grown old.

The presence of Roman time in the verse, especially the sense of the sorrows that are the price of empire, is

also profoundly felt in the diffusion of pathos through the poem, not the pathos of individual lives but of the general lot, which makes it the saddest book of the world. It contains three great defeats; the destruction of Troy, the fall of Carthage, which is the atmosphere of fate in which the personal tragedy of Dido burns out on her funeral pyre, and the overthrow of Turnus; the true action is contained in these passages; and, in addition, through Aeneas is finally successful, his checks have been so many and his success is so long delayed and is so palely realized that his career, in the impression it makes, may almost count as a fourth defeat. Against this scene of disaster the majesty of Rome's final triumph in history, though it fills all the horizons of the poem, blazes in vain. Here are the tears of time. *Lacrimae rerum* seems almost the other name of the "Aeneid," as it is its best known and central phrase. The "chanter of the Pollio" had come to this. He who was the first to sound the strain of world-hope was also now the first to strike that parallel chord of world-woe which has reverberated down all after ages. The "Miserere" follows the "Gloria" as manhood follows youth. If the "Aeneid" were only a poem of heroic action, and not a symbol of life long lived, the suffering would be absorbed in the action; but the poem is heavy with thought and clouded with feeling like a sun struggling with eclipse. The in-

VIRGIL

tellectual force in it, the passion of thought, Virgil's overmastering sympathy with the victim — and Aeneas by his long sufferings is essentially a victim — shake its containing bounds, and again and again threaten its epical form. A thousand lines have the lyrical cry; they could, and do, stand alone, each one a poem. The dramatic power in the episode of Dido threatens to overbear the moral unity of the structure; the didactic depth of teaching in the descent to Hades threatens to intermit the sense of action and shift the scene to the academy; and at every turn, when the epic seems slipping from his hand, Virgil invokes Rome, returns to that ground-swell of his music, and fuses all disparate elements in its enveloping power. It is the thought of Ascanius and the Julian line that overrules the wrongs of Dido; and in the Elysian fields it is the encomium of Rome — the most majestic lines ever written by the hand of man — and the bead-roll of her heroes and the vision of her Augustan triumph that restore the epical interest and supremacy. It is in these ways most truly that, as Tennyson said, this “ocean-roll of rhythm sounds forever of imperial Rome.”

Rome, too, sustains the verse in its weakest part, the mythology, and gives to that debilitated supernatural element the only reality which it contains. Virgil was born too late to be a true believer in Olympus; but in

placing the prophecy of Rome on the lips of Jupiter and in identifying the fate of Rome with the divine purpose and will he made the mythological creed discharge a true and important function in the poem, and in fact its only function; except for this, Olympus is only a traditional adornment, a part of the mechanical scheme and surface pictorialness of the plot, and one element in that many-sided perspective of human history in which the poem is so remarkably beyond all others. If, however, Olympus is a shadow and Virgil recedes from it in his mind, on the other hand he is far advanced and moves forward in what was to Homer the shadow-world, the life beyond the grave; in his thought and sentiment there is not only the sense of profound reality, but he touches on the confines of revealed religion. Here most strikingly, in the sweep backward to the still visible but fading gods and in the sweep forward to the still unborn Christian ages, the "Aeneid" shows that characteristic of greatness in literature which lies in its being a watershed of time; it looks back to antiquity in all that clothes it with the past of imagination, character and event, and forward to Christian times in all that clothes it with emotion, sentiment and finality to the heart. If, as is sometimes said, Gibbon's history is the bridge between the ancient and the modern world, the "Aeneid" is the high central ridge where time itself joined both.

VIRGIL

Virgil was so great a poet because he assimilated his vast mental experience, and turned it, in the true Roman way, to power over the future. His language itself — and he was the “lord of language” — bears the Roman stamp. Scarce any poet is so brief; like all the masters of poetic speech he seldom carries his sentence beyond three lines, and more often he clasps the sense in shorter limits, and notably in those “half-lines” which are so often spoken of as the special characteristic of his style, though they are also to be found in Shakspeare with like power. Oratory belongs to the epic as the lyric belongs to the drama, as its rhetorical means of intensity; and oratory was a Roman art. It belongs to Virgil equally with his winged music. It is the oratory of Brutus, not of Antony; and it is present in spirit and method, not only in the set speeches and narratives, but in the general flow of the verse; the weight of thought, the compactness of vision, the intensity of the lyrical cry of feeling itself, are indebted to it, for it is the native world of Roman speech, and Virgil in his song could only heighten, refine and amplify it, pour it in more lucid and tender voices of the spirit, which was none the less a Roman spirit. It is common to regard the earlier books of the “Aeneid” which are more inspired by the Greek element in Virgil’s culture as the greater; but in the later books in which the inspiration of the home-land prevails

GREAT WRITERS

more, and not less excellently in its own qualities, if the presence of Rome is less imperially impressive, it has more primitive charm. The early air of Rome is here, the youth of primeval Italy, when Empire was far away. In Mezentius and Turnus, and especially in Evander, there is an original impulse, a native stamp; and, most of all, in Camilla. Few poets cast a new type of womanhood. Camilla is the first of those ideal Italian women who have glorified the pages of Tasso and the canvasses, divine and human, of a hundred artists. If the later books of the "Aeneid" are less valued, it is partly because they are purer in originality, more Italian in their interest, and in limiting themselves to the evolution of a romantic past for the soil of Italy and the beginnings of Rome make a narrower appeal. To Virgil this task was, perhaps, dearer than the echoes of Troy and the sorrows of Carthage, but he worked with names that sounded less in the ears of the world. In one respect he succeeds marvellously; both on the voyage and in Italy he gives the sense of the early Mediterranean world as a place of wandering colonists and rising settlements in lonely places, a sense of the taking possession of the virgin land, with seas and coasts and spaces never to be crossed again; such a wonder-world did not come to man's view a second time, so effectually, till the days of Cortez and Magellan and De Soto, in the dawn of the Americas.

VIRGIL

The primitive time, such as it is shown in Evander, has the same reality, and his hospitality has retained in men's minds its place as the historic and ideal moment of the simplicities of the first life of men on still unviolated soil. If one's eye is on the Roman spirit of the poem, he will not find the Italian prepossession of its last books an obstacle to his interest; but rather the charm of a more home-bred inspiration will endear to him its humilities, its native character and the nobility of human feeling which is nowhere in the poem so constant, pervasive and pure. If Rome is less, in these passages, in her imperial form, Italy is more; and it is that Italy in which the true Rome resided and to which she returned, of which the Empire itself now seems a planet she cast from her larger and more immortal life.

The poem of Rome, however, even though such a nation as Italy fall heir to it, could not maintain its intimacy with the modern mind and continue to make a direct appeal to life, unless it were something more. There is a greatness in the "Aeneid" beyond the presence of Rome in the verse. It might seem that Virgil was by nature little fitted for the epic; his initiation into life had been through that "passive youth" which Shelley describes, the type of poetic boyhood, sensitive, impressible, inexhaustibly recipient; and all his days he was a scholar drawing into his brooding thoughts the spectacle

GREAT WRITERS

of things till his knowledge was equal to the world-culture of his time; that such a man should give back to the world what he had received from it in the shape of a poem of action seems incongruous, and, doubtless, like Tasso and Milton and Spenser and Tennyson, in their several degrees, he experienced the natural difficulties of the task. Yet, to the brooding spirit, not thought, but action is the true sphinx of life; not what is dreamed or reasoned or desired, but what is done, what God permits, as the phrase goes, the power of unrighteousness that is nine-tenths of life; this fastens the eye, perplexes the mind, disturbs the heart. Virgil, born late and acquainted with the world long lived in, was of a contemplative mind; in the "Aeneid" thought shadows every word, a subtle judgment blends with every action clothing it, as music clothes the line, in an element of its own, pitying, appealing, affirming, according to the motions of the poet's soul; and hence the "Aeneid" has its grandest phase, by virtue of which it has entered into the hearts of so many later generations and still enters. It is a meditation upon life.

The modes in which the poem thus affects the reader are infinitely varied; sometimes so intimate as to seem the voice in one's own heart of one's own life, or so lofty and assured as to seem the voice of all men's hearts, or so world-sweeping in its pathos as to seem the voice di-

vine. Unbroken is the sense of the difficulty of life, not merely under its old conception as a warfare, but as a thing of burden, of frequent mistake, of unforeseen and unmerited disaster, of repeated defeat, of uncertain issue; the toiling power of Rome is made up of the innumerable toils of miserable men, and about the main actors are the files of captive women, the sons burning on their funeral pyres before the faces of their parents, all the wretchedness of a military state for the private life. The element of difficulty felt in the reverses of the main fortune of the tale, in its birth in the terrors of the last night of Ilium, in the wrong landings, the insidious dangers of Carthage, the burning of the fleet, is, on the individual scale broken into a thousand cries of death and sorrow essentially personal and domestic. Life on land and sea is a field of battle, and everywhere are corpses rolled by Simois or the ocean-wave, and in every prospect the heart follows the remnant of men, in their beaten courage ever more courageous, but none the less victims of life. "Pain, pain, ever, forever," rings through the poem like a Promethean cry; the burden of Priam, the burden of Dido, the burden of Turnus, kingdom after kingdom, and by the way the strewn corpses of Palinurus, Euryalus, Pallas. In the Elysian fields Aeneas marvels why any soul should desire to see the light of life. Over all there hangs in heaven the doubtful interest

of the gods in human fates. "If any gods be just" — "if there be any kindness in heaven" — these are the refrains of all the prayers. In the presence of the mystery of what is done on earth the reason, always unsatisfied, will not be silent and refuses to yield its just share in the conduct of life; if, in one age, the tale be of Eden and the Fall, this offends the mind's sense of justice; if, in another time, it be of the struggle for existence from the dawn of life, this offends the mind's sense of mercy; in knowledge of justice and mercy, the mind finds its own superiority to the environment in which it is imprisoned, and in its moods of sincerest reason still seeks refuge in the provisional prayer on Virgil's lips.

Lucretius had lived; and something of all this difficulty, pain and uncertainty had come to light in that great intellect. He was essentially one of the eternal Puritan brood, personal revolters against church and state, which in history have been the twin tyrants of mankind; he looked back on the past and saw there immense and long-continued error in important parts of life, the delusion and woe of whole peoples since time began; and he denounced superstition as the mother of human ills. He was an individualist, a man of conscious virtue, self-sufficing; he had an empire in his mind; he spoke out, a lonely intellect in a world stripped for his eyes to the bare principles of its being, and in his words was the

VIRGIL

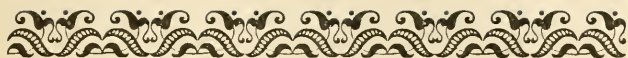
fiery seed of the new universe of scientific thought. Virgil was of a different strain, a natural worshipper, reverent of the rite, attached to the myth, clinging with his affections to the outward garniture of life and history; but his eyes were on the same things that Lucretius saw. He, too, was finding in philosophy the true goal. He felt from youth the compelling power of thought of Rome's greatest mind as he looked out on the long Pagan retrospect of life's beauty and sorrow. How did he save himself from the intellectual indignation, the despair of the divine, the earthly pessimism of Rome's great sceptic; for the face of Virgil, "majestic in his sadness at the doubtful doom of human kind," is the grave face of a believer. He saved himself by the power of love.

He was a lover of life; only an immense love of life could have so revealed to him the pity of it. At every touch he shows a spirit naturally dependent; teachable, yielding, hospitable, responsive, sympathetic, appealing, his heart flows out upon things, uniting with them at every contact, from his early loves of nature, romance and antiquity, his long passion of patriotism, on to his brooding over the fates of men; and yet with his self-surrender to the things of life there goes, equal with it, the true Roman self-control; it is a surrender that returns to him as strength. At every turn of the verse he evokes the moment of beauty from the natural world,

and from life its moment of pain, with the clarity of the poet; charm, which is the one, and pathos, which is the other, are the words that leap from the heart in the memory of what he wrote, and after these the third is majesty, which is the principle of control in him, and completes and perfects his genius. These are wonderfully softened by his constant tenderness. The epics generally find no place for children in them; but here there are three — Astyanax, Ascanius and Marcellus — and two of these are dead boys. Of all Virgil's loves, the greatest in power is the love of human life; and it is this that makes the poem so Christian-like, because it is embodied and conveyed in the forms of sorrow and especially of bereavement. Yet the burden of that sorrow comes as the burden of the Roman world running its long career of battle-strife; here is the heart of Rome beating in the only Roman breast in which it had become fully conscious of itself. The world was ready to be re-born; there is no break; the premonitions of Christian feeling are natural to Virgil. It is this that makes him of all ancient writers the nearest to modern times, of all epic poets the nearest to all nations. The "Aeneid" is, I think, the greatest single book written by man because of its inclusiveness of human life, of life long lived, in the things of life. It is the dirge of Rome; majestic in its theme, beautiful in its emotions, sad in its philosophy, it is almost the dirge of

VIRGIL

lie; yet many a modern mind still turns from the contemplation of human life in history, like the thousands of old days, to Virgil, and says with Dante, *Tu se' lo mio maestro*, "Thou art my master."



Great Writers



MONTAIGNE

Montaigne was one of the great confessors of life. The confession is a paradox; for he reveals himself, and it is the reader who stands revealed. A personal writer, whose whole story is about himself, as he says, matters of his own career, opinions, anecdotes, trivialities of the daily life, a diary of privacies; yet throughout it is not he who is interesting, but that human nature of which he is the showman. His work is not to represent life, as the novelist does in fiction, but to illustrate it by his own example. The fortune of those who have been drawn to him, now for three centuries, is identical; they all claim a share in his individuality. Emerson says of that copy he found in his father's library: "It seemed to me as if I had myself written the book, in some former life, so sincerely it spoke to my thought and experience." Byron heard the same personal tone in it. Not all of Emerson is there, not all of Byron; there are neither heights nor depths of

GREAT WRITERS

the soul in the book; but human nature in the norm of its range, in its middle flight, in its average of the gentleman, a little knowledge, a little morals, a little religion, with much moderation and good sense — these are there, exemplifying the practical life of the great and small in the world in which Montaigne lived and in which his admirers have lived after him. In the practice of life that the world wills, Montaigne is a master; he is its moralist; the “Essays” contain its rule and counsels, and are vivaciously varied by the gossipy interwoven tale of his adventures, body and soul.

Montaigne, nevertheless, had in his own right the figure that arrests the eye and traits that jet from the memory in high relief. One thinks of him commonly in connection with his famous tower, the great Tour de Montaigne, that overhangs the entrance of the château, round, dungeon-like, massive, in the uppermost of whose three stories is the circular room, spacious, with its rafters on which were cut inscriptions, the author’s mottoes of life, and its deep embrasured windows through which he looked out to three parts of heaven, on the garden, farm-yard and court, and over the sloping estates to the distant Perigord hills; here was his library, and Montaigne is thought of here, in retirement, like a solitary surveying the world. But this is a fantastic conception. He was in reality a man of affairs all his life; he had the

MONTAIGNE

mind of a man of affairs, with something superadded. The best inheritance he drew from his father, an active, capable, successful man, was the athletic vigour and business capacity that did him yeoman service in that age when both were needed to keep one's feet in the world about; but to his father he also owed that added something — he owed a careful education. The elder Montaigne, though not learned, was the friend of scholars, and experienced that new interest in the intellectual life which in his day was moulding France as the Renaissance spread to the northwest out of Italy; it was a movement that dealt much with education and favoured originality, experiment, eccentricity even; and it was, perhaps, by the touch of Italian conversation and ideas that the father determined that the son should be brought up with Latin for his mother tongue. He had already put the boy to nurse in the country with poor people, in order that he might have his mind and sympathy open to the life of the humble, and so contract a lively feeling of their condition; and now he secured proper instruction, a learned German who taught the child to speak in Latin from his earliest accents, while all who came in contact with him were compelled to conform to the rule, even the servants, so that this chatter, it is said, left traces in the country speech. The boy felt and talked in Latin till he was six years old, and later in

GREAT WRITERS

life French was so much less natural to him that in moments of deep excitement the instinctive words in his brain were Latin. He was bred at college from six to thirteen, immediately put to the law, and made counselor at twenty-one, in which capacity three years later he became one of the Parliament of Bordeaux, the city that throughout his life was the stage of his public actions and of which his father was mayor. The family by its integrity, kindness and energy, had long held a well-established place in the province. On his father's death, Montaigne who had married some five years before became its head. The inscription which records his accession may still be read at the château, as follows:

“In the year of our Lord 1571, aged thirty-eight, on the eve of the Kalends of March, the anniversary day of his birth, Michel de Montaigne, having long been weary of the slavery of courts and public employments, takes refuge in the bosom of the learned Virgins. He designs in quiet and indifference to all things, to conclude there the remainder of his life, already more than half-past, and he has dedicated to repose and liberty this agreeable and peaceful abode, which he has inherited from his ancestors.”

When Montaigne thus sought the private life in the middle of his years, he had already lived a full and active career in a station of moderate distinction which

MONTAIGNE

had brought him in contact with various aspects of the human lot. He knew the life of the court and had led it at Paris and elsewhere with a young man's interest, with gallant adventures, with gaming and episodes and debauch, and on all sides he had formed ties with persons of power. He knew the life of the camp, and had followed it, as the custom was, at sieges and on marches to which a young man of his position would go at his will and come away at his choice. He knew the life of administrative affairs to which his post in the Parliament obliged him and by which he was brought into serious concerns affecting his locality and the interests of his faith and country. He had taken no leading part, but he had observed human life in many ways, and he had learned to keep his balance in a difficult age. He was a firm Catholic and loyalist, but he had the art of remaining on good terms with all parties, and in his own country which was in the disturbed region he suffered but little in the religious and civil dissensions that distracted and oppressed the times with the changing fortunes of Henry of Navarre. He was that marvel of the moral life, a man of integrity who is a master of compromise.

An entirely different phase is revealed in the only incident of distinction that marked his early years. This was his friendship with Estienne de la Boétie, a fellow-counsellor in the Parliament of Bordeaux, famous as the

GREAT WRITERS

youthful author of the most eloquent attack ever made upon the institution of Monarchy, which though then circulated was not published for many years, and known also as a poet. The two young men were of about the same age, and their friendship, which was meant by themselves to restore the classical example to the world, was terminated after six years by La Boëtie's early death. This attachment is one of the legends of literature, and in it Montaigne showed most heart beyond any other action of his life. He idolized it after the ancient model in his essay on "Friendship;" he wrote a minute account of the death-bed scenes, with the classical touch, but real; and his references to his loss are among the few passages of his writings that have poignancy. His first task when he became master of himself in the world was to edit such of his friend's papers as it seemed discreet to publish, but he reserved the immortal essay on "Monarchy" for less turbulent times and the next age. It was not in his character to find in his pious duties to the dead a legacy of unrest that might disturb the years which he had dedicated to "repose and liberty."

Montaigne's retirement was by no means absolute. Throughout the score of years that it lasted before death carried him off at the edge of sixty, he kept in touch with the business of this world; and his privacy was especially broken by two events, his travels into Italy and his in-

MONTAIGNE

cumbency of the mayoralty of Bordeaux. The Italian journey, which took place after eight years of labour on the "Essays" and when he was forty-seven years old, was primarily undertaken on the score of health since he had become subject to the stone, and he may also have desired to observe the effect of the first publication of his work, then just issued, on his reputation. He saw Paris, assisted at a siege, and made his way by Baden and the Tyrol to Venice, and thence to the chief cities of northern and central Italy, visiting the baths and taking the waters by the way. He was an excellent traveller. He rode on horseback, a habit which he greatly enjoyed, with a sufficient but not too expensive suite, in the style befitting a French gentleman of his rank; and he took pains to live in the country according to its own customs, to mix with its people and lay aside his native prejudices, to get the full benefit of travel by means of a lively curiosity, an open mind and a hospitable manner. He was bound by no rule or plan, but zigzagged along according to his mood, doubling on his track or deviating from it as the fancy took him; and in all places he conformed and gave way and reaped his harvest of experience and observation. Social tact distinguished him. He got on with the papal critics of the "Index," who handled his "Essays" with some doubtfulness, just as he had done with Henry of Navarre, and they left him to make his own

GREAT WRITERS

emendations. He gave a dance for the country girls at the Baths of Lucca. He made friends everywhere. In spite of acute attacks of illness, with discomfort and wearing pain, he maintained an even and settled demeanour, and thoroughly enjoyed the new scenes, the honourable entertainment and the variety of life and manners. The note-book which constitutes his *Travels* reveals the man as plainly and more simply than the "Essays." Posterity remembers out of it two things, the eloquent description of the ruins of Rome, and the offering which he was solicitous to hang up at Loretto — "a framed tablet with four silver figures attached, representing our Lady, myself, my wife and my daughter."

He spent a year and a half in this journey, and it was still unfinished when he received news of his election to the mayoralty of Bordeaux. He made his return without haste, and as soon as he had arrived told them, he says, "what they had to expect of me — no memory, no vigilance, no experience, no vigour; but also no hatred, no ambition, no avarice, and no violence." It was an excellent programme that was thus promised in the distressed situation of affairs, and the character of Montaigne for justice, moderate temper and tact must have much commended him in that time and place; he pleased well enough to receive the unusual distinction of a re-election, and thus served for four years. It was charac-

MONTAIGNE

teristic of his career that he entertained Henry of Navarre at his château in the last year of his term, and that, a pestilence desolating the country at its conclusion, he declined to return to the stricken city to preside at his successor's election. He was an expert avoider of risks. He was careful to leave his château undefended in order not to invite attack, and this device succeeded; but he owed his extraordinary immunity from the ravage and insult of either party to his character and manners. Once when a hostile company had entered the château by a kind of stealth, Montaigne's hospitable good nature carried the matter so well that the leader took his party off without sign of the injury that had been intended; and once when Montaigne was stopped on the road and robbed, his bold spirit and fair temper so told in his favour that he was released and warned of other danger by the captain of the band. He was not deficient in courage, but what carried him through in so many difficult and delicate situations was his knowledge of men and his open appearance, his mastery of social intercourse. He had none of the traits of a recluse; he was more a soldier and a man of pleasure, used to the business of life, sincere, honest, moderate, and above all adroit. In his travels, his office, his adventures of whatever kind, he has the stamp of the man who lives, who knows how to take and give in a real world, and to whom living is more

primary than thinking — in other words, the man of action.

Montaigne, the writer, none the less, was formed by his education. Education had an equal importance with life in stamping that image of personality. It was a classical education, but he did not get it at school. The college where he was bred in his boyhood years was one of the most distinguished in France, but it was one of those hells which civilization has imposed on the suffering youth of most generations. Montaigne tells us how he slipped away from his routine tasks and read by stealth his Ovid and Virgil and found his true world there. He gave his education to himself by reading in his manhood. The important books were of course the ancients. The Latin authors he read in their own tongue in which he was well grounded, and the Greek authors for the most part in the translations then made by the French humanists; and, generally speaking, he knew the Greek authors later than the Latin, and especially Plato came to him toward the close of his life. He was essentially a pupil of Plutarch, a sort of man who has become in our culture extinct but in the sixteenth century flourished in the new lands of the Renaissance; and especially he was an intellectual child of Plutarch, the moralist. When poetry began to grow shallow in interest to Montaigne, as it belonged to his nature

that it should, history and biography became the food of his serious thought. They appealed to him because they illustrate life; and it was life that Montaigne held as the centre of his meditation always — not life in its principles, but rather life as it is lived, the scene of life. For example, he says that he always had great curiosity to know how men died, and would eagerly inquire for all the details. Plutarch in his various writings gives immense illustration of life thus viewed in all its aspects, and with it a wealth of apposite reflection on human nature and the fortunes of men. The conduct of life broadly speaking is his theme, as it became Montaigne's. To all such knowledge out of antiquity Montaigne added the memoirs and narratives of the recent world. He applied this to his own ends. To him all these facts of life were not an affair of learning, not information, gossip, but means by which he came to a better understanding of human nature, or, as he said, of himself. His proper study, he affirmed, was only himself. The power of his education consisted in the vital connection he made through it between himself and the story of men's lives as he picked up its multitude of fragments in the biographical and historical records of past times. For principles of conduct, for maxim and apothegm, he fell back on Seneca, and with all the discursive philosophy of the later ancient world he was in touch; but he became a

moralist because he was primarily an observer, and he was always more interested in the premises than in the conclusions of his thoughts, more absorbed in the curious spectacle of human phenomena than in the laws of human nature. He had an immense interest in things human, and this gave him the secret of originality. "I am human," he said. "I am immensely interesting to myself, I will write about myself." The "Essays" were thus engendered. This directness of Montaigne belongs to the man, to his vital energy. He had been formed by life, it is true; but in his mind, the mind of a man of affairs, there was, as I have said, something superadded; it was a meditative habit. There was, however, nothing of the closet in it, nothing of the abstract and logical, the speculative for its own sake; it was a thing of experience, empirical. The intellectual part of his book is a meditation upon life as something observed, recorded, practised; the vivid reality of the book, which makes it seem often written by the reader, springs from this. A man of affairs, in his ripeness, meditating upon the business of living, with cogency, with brilliancy, with unexampled frankness — this was what life and education combined to make of Montaigne; and the "Essays" are the mind of such a man.

Montaigne was a born man of letters, but like many men so born he did not think of making the career. His

MONTAIGNE

father's house was a place of books, of scholars and the intellectual ferment of the age; he had been trained by men of learning and had mingled with the poets of the times; but he showed no early disposition to write a book. There was no adolescence in his genius. For learning he had the characteristic literary contempt. The first requisite for any career for him was that it should be a life. Montaigne had that secret, which has so often developed the highest literary faculty, the power to absorb life into himself directly, to let life have its way with him as an experience, and yet to maintain in the midst of it complete possession of himself, to lead his own life. He established terms with his environment. With that facility which seems rather a characteristic of southern than of northern peoples, he accepted the social fictions with all solemnity. He was a true Catholic in faith; and the truth revealed through the church, with the observance of its attendant and customary ritual, as things beyond the pale of what is merely human — this was accepted as being imposed by his baptism; he conformed, and did so with apparent sincerity. He was a true loyalist, and the system of state, with its ritual also, was accepted as being imposed by his birth in the country and under the crown; he conformed in secular as in religious matters to things established. But this being settled, he remained the master of himself in both thought and action, the

GREAT WRITERS

man of his own choice. He was by temperament Epicurean, given to an indulgent habit of pleasure, with the wisdom of the moderates; yet his character was of a more vigorous stock than such words imply; he was hardy and sufficiently energetic. Indeed there was in his spirit a nobler capacity, a movement toward enthusiasm even, and a power of admiration that is most often found in alliance with more active and ardent ambition than belonged to his nature. The Stoical precepts awakened a glow in him, the personality of Socrates seized him with the fervour of hero-worship, Cicero disturbed him by his weaknesses. But this strength, this latent passion, this capacity to be morally great never reached the kindling point. One is aware of it by its heat, but never by its flame. He had dedicated himself to repose as well as to liberty; he would pass life agreeably — that was the main thing. He was active intellectually rather than morally; his curiosity was unlimited, and what it brought him was the food of untiring and discursive reflection; but, before all, he was a moralist in the scientific spirit of exploration, and not at all in the proselytizing spirit of the believer.

He discovered himself as a writer almost, it would seem, by one of those accidents of life which are also not uncommon in the history of literature. He was not an author, and apparently had no thought of being one, when

MONTAIGNE

his father put into his hands a book which he asked him to translate. It was a theological work of the times of the Reformation, a "Natural Theology" by Raymond de Sebonde, written in a curious sort of Spanish with Latin terminations and left at the château by one of the elder Montaigne's scholarly visitors, an attempt to show the truth of religion on grounds of human reason independent of revelation. Montaigne translated this work, and it was afterward published. Later he was led to compose an apology or defence of it, a paper included in his "Essays" and the longest of them. In the meditation of this important piece and in writing out his thoughts Montaigne seems to have found himself intellectually; and it may fairly be said that the various matter of the famous "Essays" flowed from the author of the "Apology" as truly as Scott's Novels proceeded in their long sequence from "the Author of Waverley." The conjunction of the two names is suggestive; for, at not far from the same mature period of manhood as Scott began his career in fiction, and from a similar foundation of life that had practically fed his genius intermittently in the moral sphere by affairs and books, Montaigne like Scott at the moment of Waverley was at the moment of his apology for Raymond de Sebonde at the point of ignition; he had been prepared by temperament, experience and studies, in a purely practical way,

without literary premeditation, to become the great moralist of life that the "Essays" revealed. Montaigne, like Scott and Cervantes, was the product of life, in which studies, it is true, were a large element, but of which reality was the substance and vigour; his book is consequently one of those greatest books in which life is supreme. The centre of it is Montaigne himself, because that was the point where for him life converged all its forces; and hence, too, it is often and habitually a book of apparent egotisms, of trivialities, of confidences, as of a man talking with a friend and of a friend, with the frankness of privacy; but this personality which is the centre of Montaigne's world is also the centre of all of us, it is human nature, it is ourselves. In this book life is so supreme that the reader himself lives in it.

Montaigne's subject which he unfolds in the "Essays" is the scene of life, that existence of which "all the world's a stage." He does not do this by the methods of the imagination, as the poet and novelist do. He brings to the task observation, history, biography, all that experience has given him from his personal career or that he had drawn from recent times, and in addition the great bulk of recorded life that the philosophers and essayists and historians of antiquity had gathered, a mass of detail that was as modern to him as the facts of journalism. This great body of real experience and moral

MONTAIGNE

reflection upon it which man had accumulated at the end of the classical civilization had been displaced by the Christian ages, but in Montaigne's day it flowed back upon men's minds through the channels of the Renaissance; and it has now again been displaced by the insurgence of the modern ages of colonization, industrialism, mechanical science, and in its stead we have a different history and other biographies and travels which have not yet developed that finality as an accumulated result of long living which belongs to antiquity. Montaigne thus stands, as it were, in the Renaissance gap between the Christian and modern ages, and surveys life "looking before and after," by the undying lamp that he had found in the Roman tomb. He has placed Christianity on one side, and, having made his peace with it, it troubles him no more; he has hung up the votive images in the shrine of Loretto, and will die when the time comes in the proper odours and acts; but merely as the reasoning animal that is earthly man he will examine human nature without regard to its spiritual part which is a thing whose habitat is the church. Human nature, so considered, is the same that it was in classical times and is perhaps there more simply observed because of the absence of any entanglement with revealed truth. Montaigne thus, though he did not live in the past, lived, in a sense, in the thoughts of the past, and hence one feels in

GREAT WRITERS

the "Essays" a certain breath of remoteness at times, a certain mustiness of thought. The idea of death, for example, was a fixed idea of ancient moralists; and Montaigne is much concerned with it, as if it were as important for him as for Cato and Seneca, as if he were under the same need of Stoical rather than Christian preparation for it, more as a mortal end than an immortal beginning. This idea is, no doubt, part of his literary legacy; he could not avoid prepossession with it, his authors being what they were; but its importance in his reflection indicates a pre-Christian mood in his mind, marks the infection of his paganism, discloses the intellectual and moral atavism which was imbedded in the Renaissance. The Stoical insistence on the idea of death is the trait of a dying culture; it could not fill the mind of a Christian in that antique way unless he were already detached in soul from the lessons of his own faith to some degree. In Montaigne this interest, except in so far as it was purely literary, marks a reversion to a past type of intellect, a dislocation from his age which assimilates him with the great world-minds independent of their origin from any particular age; in fact, while seeming a mere reversion mentally, it signifies really his modern enfranchisement. Such an escape into the past was the way to a cosmopolitan point of view.

This cosmopolitan habit was, in fact, Montaigne's dis-

tion. What an excellent traveller he was is seen in his account of the Italian journey; but he was a better traveller in his mind. An enlightened spirit, a mind hospitable to new things, a marvellous power of detaching himself from his own heredity and civilization belonged to him; his mind was not repelled, but freshened by novelty and strangeness. In the reports of travellers from the Perus and the Indias he sought out manners and customs, the differences from what was established in European habits and ideas; he was interested in what these savages and pagans had made of themselves in their own worlds apart. The page of antiquity, too, in which his curiosity was so much absorbed, held a broad and various world, the old Mediterranean civilization of many races, institutions, religions, thoughts, careers. This past in all its diversity was, too, it must be remembered, far better known to him than the middle ages or even his own times of which the human story had not yet been spread in books in anything like the same degree. His world of intelligence was substantially the classical world; there were the things he knew, his intellectual interests, his dominant mental memories. When he was made, during his Italian residence, a citizen of Rome, an honour that gave him so much delight, no one living better deserved the title; for he was truly a citizen of that eternal Rome which endures in the mind of man. Indeed,

he had something of what may be called a colonial dependence on the life of antiquity, and his outlook and feeling toward Rome and Athens were not unlike the attitude of the scholars of New England toward London and Paris in the last century. He was more at home there than in his own age; his outward life and action were in his own neighbourhood, in the religious and civil strife of a province with which he made terms for the day and the hour, but the life of his mind was in the company of the antique world and its affairs. He naturally fell into the philosophic attitude which prevailed in that exhausted paganism; and from the survey of the scene of life familiar to him out of that Greco-Roman past and under the guidance of Roman thought that gave his mind direction, he gathered that general impression of the feebleness of man's nature which kept on deepening with years until it became the master theme of his matter, and made the famous "What do I know" the legend of his shield in literature.

This impeachment of man's faculty for knowledge was nothing new. It was made up of a résumé of the rags and scraps of those old sceptics in whom the intellect, which had awakened in Greece and had a long career, found its first disillusionment in the pursuit of truth. It had a curious place in Montaigne's day as being the complement of the idea of the necessity of revealed

MONTAIGNE

truth miraculously made known to the race; but it was not in that aspect that Montaigne cared for it. The feebleness of man's natural faculty for truth fell in with Montaigne's general convictions with regard to human nature; it harmonized with the Epicurean ease of his temperament. The idea of sex, to approach his philosophy in another way, was a cardinal interest in his mind. He makes his confessions with equal frankness and discretion, but with unconcealed thought. He brings no imagination, no romance to bear upon the matter; he is scientific, naturalistic, and unashamed. As the higher spirituality, which he leaves to the church, is absent from his philosophy, the higher ethics is absent from his morality. To live with ease in this world involves concessions to established conditions; and as Montaigne conceded to the church and the state, he conceded also to nature, and was seemingly as unaware of any conflict in one case more than in another; this, it seemed to him, was good sense, the quality in which, in the judgment of his readers, Montaigne is more eminent than any other writer. And, in truth, viewing the scene of human life in its action and its thinking, apart from any divine element, as the stage of the world where man is only man, and seeking its examples in the confusions of his own age and in the retrospect of decadent and expiring Rome, Montaigne has within these limits a sing-

ular gift for reasonableness, for setting forth the life that the world wills, for good sense. The weakness of human nature, whether knowing or acting, being accepted as primary there remains for Montaigne only the question of an easy adjustment thereto, of a search for "repose and liberty;" and such good sense is the key.

In the discursive setting forth of human life and nature under these lights Montaigne developed one great virtue, toleration. It isolates him in that age, and does him honour forever. A conviction of the futility of human faculties in the pursuit of truth carries with it the sense of uncertainty in doctrines and induces a mood of indifference toward all tenets, whereby the habit of toleration becomes natural; and, in addition, familiarity with the diversity of human opinion and of moral practice, that has filled the world both in antiquity and among the newly-found regions of the earth gave him the poise and freedom of the travelled mind, of the man acquainted with men and cities, of the man detached from the slavery of one environment. A classical education had exercised on Montaigne one of its great freeing powers; it had made him familiar with a civilization, not specifically and theologically Christian, but of an overawing type; it had redressed the balance of ecclesiastical prejudice, and restored the secular life to its due proportions as a thing of this world, of reason and of nature,

MONTAIGNE

apart from revelation. In Montaigne's case, indeed, life had become essentially a purely secular affair, and he considered it as a moralist quite as if he had been born in the fourth century and remained unconverted. Toleration was the natural habit of a mind so bred, and so capable of entering into another age. It may have been grounded, if one examines the matter curiously, rather on a kindly philosophical contempt of human nature than on the doctrine that the way to truth lies through the conflicts of an untrammelled liberty of thought and speech; it may not have been the toleration of a free government, such as is now conceived; but in the days of the religious wars and at the end of the sixteenth century in France, it was the mark of a singularly enlightened spirit. The spectacle of France at that time, and the personal experience of Montaigne who had friends on both sides of the struggling factions, no doubt aided him, by virtue of his repugnance to the folly and turmoil of the scene, to establish the principle in himself; but it also belonged to his conciliating and compromising temperament, to his power of facilitating life, to his classically bred intelligence, and to his native kindliness. Toleration was in him a human instinct, strongly supported by his knowledge and experience and approved by his judgment, and not merely a conclusion of philosophy or principle of government. He

was as singular, too, for his hatred of cruelty. What he has to say of torture in legal processes, of the imposition of cruel punishments, of public executions and the like matters, also marks him out in the age. He was one of those who had become humane as well as reasonable in his converse with that antiquity which was then infusing secular vigour into the blood of the world as an antidote to the ecclesiastical poisons that had long corrupted free human nature. Yet in his "Essays" there is one singular silence. He does not mention nor even allude to the massacre of St. Bartholomew, which was one of the great events of his lifetime, and by which he must have been deeply moved. It is an indication of his good sense. His retirement, after all, was indeed profound intellectually, in the great round Tour de Montaigne, by the Perigord hills; there he freely speculated and gossiped in his learned way in the still air of delightful studies; but practically when in the midst of state-affairs, and there was question of publishing his friend La Boëtie's attack on "Monarchy" or of a St. Bartholomew's Day, he kept close mouth. This sense of contradiction between the intellectual and the practical life is necessarily felt in Montaigne; it affects the sincerity of the man, for many readers; but it belongs to the psychology of the conformist in every age. Montaigne has lived by his thought rather than by his life, and by his privacy rather than by

MONTAIGNE

his publicity; yet thought and life with him moved with singular intimacy and equality; and as his career, despite its prudencies, will be held manly, energetic, honourable and above all wise, so his thought, despite its reticencies — and they are many and serious — will be held bold, free, advancing and again above all wise. Repose and liberty, could he compass and reconcile them, were a possession worth many practical compromises.

Montaigne's name, for mankind, is that of the great doubter. The modern spirit, in this one great phase of its manifestation, may be said to begin with him, in literature. He was not aware of the career that this scepticism was to run, of the deep reach and radiations of its undermining power in later days, agnostic and pessimistic, as far as to the base of life itself. He did not question the worth of life; he had found life a pleasant thing; but he certainly doubted the worth of the higher life. He repeatedly expresses the doubt that the exercise of the higher faculties interferes with the pleasurable good of life and introduces a disturbing element injurious to human happiness. He makes that interrogation of civilization, in developing which Rousseau found him so fruitful a master. Montaigne, merely as a conformist, had eliminated much from life; and his temperament led him along that path to a general elimination of the

GREAT WRITERS

nobler faculties, the superior aims, the dangerous toils of the ideal, which he knew rather by observation, seeing what trouble these things brought upon the private life and public tranquillity; and in his view of the world, the life of nature, whether individually seen in the poor and humble or collectively in the newly-found savages, seemed possibly preferable to the types of civilization. Perfectibility was an idea that he did not know. Repose and liberty were the ends of life for him, and weakness its condition; not to impose too great a burden, not to accept too heavy a yoke, not to open too distant a scope, not to propose too far a goal, rather to avoid the heights, this was wisdom. It is the philosophy of one who places happiness in recognition of the limitations rather than in cultivation of the energies of life; to enjoy life it is most needful not to overestimate its worth. Such a scheme, so little exacting of force, is naturally crowned by the virtues of ease, by moderation, reasonableness, good-sense, the virtues of Montaigne.

He was at one with his theory; he is its illustration, and after all it is himself and not his theory that is interesting. The page grows antiquated and dull with outworn knowledge in proportion as the theory occupies it, tatters of the past in science, thought and scandal; but it grows vivid and contemporary as soon as he puts himself into the sentences. For him he is himself the model

MONTAIGNE

of life; the human nature that he exhibits with such vivacity is that with which he has grown acquainted in his own bosom. He tells piecemeal in the rambling method of the "Essays" all the story of himself, his birth, education and career, what has happened to him, what he has done, his tastes and habits, the secrets of his meals and his toilet, the course of his disease, the most trivial, the most dubious, the most private matters; he makes the world the familiar of his person, of his mortal being, of his quality of man. This intimacy which he ingenuously allows, as a thing the most natural to him in the world, wins credence for his sincerity in his intellectual confessions, in his examination of his thoughts and impressions, in his remarks on the ways of the world that he lived in; and this sincerity has the appearance of being absolute. It gives to his thought that quality of echo, which makes it seem the whisper of one's own experience, the utterance of one's own unframed words. Montaigne ingratiates himself in the bosom of the reader by a thousand ways, but by none more than by this of being his spokesman; it is pleasant to confess by proxy, to let another tell those truths of which human nature, in its tacitness, is half-ashamed, expose those half-lies which it is reluctant to acknowledge but of which it is aware; and it is pleasant to find the philosophy of the pleasurable, the unexigent, the not too serious, stated

GREAT WRITERS

with so much unconcern, and to feel the compromises of life take on an aspect of such reasonableness. It is in these things that the personality of Montaigne is so attractive; in the Epicurean, the Sadducean moments of life, in its average actuality of living among people of the world, he is good company; the doubt in his mind has great pardoning power, and may contain indeed a general amnesty for life.

In a temperament such as Montaigne shows in his career, his thought and his personality there is defined a universal type of man, a constant mood of the human mind, a spirit of life speaking intelligible words to men in every reflective age. It is of the fourth century or the sixteenth or the twentieth indifferently. Its reality was never more vital than in Montaigne, its words never more vivid than here; he is by far its best incarnation. The time was ripe for a lukewarm gospel; the long triumph of fanaticism was waning in its last fierce excesses; the hour of the moderates had come. After ages of dogmatism, his unconcerned "What do I know," is the voice of a new world; after centuries of spiritual strain, in every form of fervour and travesty, his radical acceptance of this world as man's proper sphere to which he should adapt himself is a welcome relaxation; after the torture, assassination and massacre, the turmoil of sect and feud, the misery of warring faiths, his sceptical tol-

MONTAIGNE

eration is a truce of reason that men might be glad to have on any terms. In his works it may seem hard to discern the morning lights; but, as happens in great books, the past and future blend there with long rays. The conjunction of his acutely alive mind with the matter of antiquity often strikes the reader as a union of the quick with the dead; but that is an illusion due to our own relaxed hold on the classical authors. He found the lettered ages of Rome and Athens more modern than any intervening century, nearer to him than his own times, superior to them; and so it came about that his book involves a great span of time, and remembers Socrates as it foreshadows Rousseau. In the midst of all this precept out of Seneca and anecdotes of the philosophers' lives, there is a constant cropping out of the great modern traits — the free exercise of reason, the appeal to nature, the restless curiosity, the plea for toleration and humaneness, the interest in education, the disposition to examine all things anew and bring them to the test of practical reality, to think out the world afresh. Montaigne's modernity is clouded, too, no doubt, not only by his antiquarianism, but by his attitude of ease toward life. It seems incongruous that one who was so little a reformer as he should be counted among the leaders of a new age; but if he did not proselytize for a cause, he exemplified what is the best and profoundest of all reforms, a reform in the

habit of thinking; he thought for himself. He was great in independence of mind; whatever he thought, it was his own. He was great, too, in force of character; whatever he did was his own. He was, as has been said, the man of his own choice. Individuality such as this is an undying ideal; it is superlatively modern; and Montaigne is thus a great type of the modern man, primarily in the conduct of his mind, and perhaps also more truly than would readily be confessed, in the conduct of his life. He was not a weakling, though his philosophy may easily be mistaken for that of a weakling. Justly interpreted, do not his concessions, compromises, reticences show strength of judgment, strength of good sense, prudence, which in practical life often avail quite as much as strength of mere opinion? Nor was truth, of itself, a large part of life for Montaigne; it was at best an uncertainty. He was not a martyr of ideas, but he was a man of ideas. He spent several years in collecting, digesting, and illustrating these ideas in the book, continually adding something to the earlier forms, and left there this portrait of himself, body and spirit. The terms on which he stands with his reader are those of friendship, and for friendship a man must be born; and it must be acknowledged that not all men are born for friendship with such a one as he describes himself. There are many who echo Clough's words — "I do not greatly think about Mon-

MONTAIGNE

taigne;" and Clough was classical, sceptical, modern, but he was serious-minded. Montaigne is not an author for serious-minded people, in that sense. He has too great detachment of mind, too great insouciance of conduct; he is in all senses too free a man.

It might seem that a book which is described as a confession of life, and one in which human nature finds itself absolved in the very bosom of the reader, is just such a one as should appeal to grave persons. But Montaigne has not the proper manner of the confessional; he is garrulous, not truly penitent, but rather scandalously interested in his own story; the confession of man's nature has quite as much the character of an exposure of life. Certainly it is a book of the disillusionment. It implies immense experience of living, of life long lived by many generations in many conditions and long meditated upon by many diverse minds. It is a book of the mature life, and century-ripened. The sublimities, the enthusiasms, the heroics of life are not here; the fiery hopes, the stimulations, the divine despairs — there is nothing of that, neither gospel, nor rallying-cry nor death-challenge. These things have long been. But the man who is acquainted with human nature in his own breast and in living men, who commands the vistas of history, of literature, of various philosophies, who knows the past issues of human hopes and toils, the man of experience, finds a

GREAT WRITERS

certain justness in the thought of Montaigne that harmonizes with the latter-day moods of life and is the more acceptable because it is graced with that lightness of spirit, that not too serious view, that tone which might so easily become mocking and yet never mocks. Though the herald of the modern age, Montaigne was deeply implicated in the past, in what man has been. In the "Essays" one finds the lees of antiquity, and somewhat the lees of life; it is the book of an old mind, of an old man, of a retirement from the world; to read it justly, the reader must have lived. Montaigne requires an afternoon light, and a mind content with the private life, with reason and nature and good sense.



Great Writers

VI



SHAKSPERE

The primary thing in Shakspeare was his sense of action. He seized all life as action in his thoughts; he led his own life as action in himself, as a career. That is his Englishry. He was a practical man; as a boy he was enterprising, in his maturity he was discreet. The traditions of his early days at Stratford show a lively, capable, eager youth, active, adventurous, expedient, quick to get into trouble, quick in marriage; and the flight from Stratford was a departure into the large scene of life, a going to London, to the field of ambition. The family had seen better days, and was in difficulties; he meant to bear up the name; he succeeded, in the end, in re-establishing the family estate in his native place. The traditions of his early days in London show the same fundamental temperament; he had no scorn of beginnings, whether he held horses at the theatre, or by whatever door of trifling service he entered on the great scene that

GREAT WRITERS

was to be his kingdom, he would get in where he could; he accepted the terms on which life was to be led in his time and place. He learned easily because he was facile to receive; he learned much because he put what he knew to use as soon as he knew it; he was quick to experiment with his faculties and what they found to work with. The stage was developing comedy and tragedy and a verbal style proper to display them; there was a stock of plays rapidly outgrown, a public demand to be met, money to be made. He made himself apprentice to the best masters of comedy and tragedy, he tried his hand at re-making the old plays, he used what he found on the stage, adding what he could of prettiness and quibble, of grace and softness in the phrase, of heat and vivacity in the dialogue, of golden cadence, comic play, tragic thrust; and gradually he moved forward, emerged, became playwright and poet, the mark of passing and impotent malice, popular with the many, well-beloved by his comrades, successful. If the history of these days were known in detail, it would not differ from the great type shown in Scott, Cervantes; infinite interest in life, unceasing industry in work, the power to live which makes men great, and with it the apparent unconsciousness of genius, the reality of the individual life, the near regard to the private good. Whatever else there may have been, the theatre was to Shakspeare a profession, a

SHAKSPERE

career; he made himself master and head of it by the toilsome process of daily life; and he measured his success in it, in one way at least, by the substance of what it brought him, wealth, position, a county name.

At London, where he led this career for twenty-five years, he had complete worldly success. His life there leaves two impressions on the mind. The first is that of immense labour, not only in the composition of the plays, but in the other necessary business of the stage and management, the acting, the preparation, the provincial tours, the court performances, the life of the theatre and its finances, the practical realities; it must have been a very busy life, and its wearing effects are plain in the rapid and deep maturing of his manhood, and in his comparatively early death. The second impression is of the ease, quiet and friendliness of his temperament, his companionableness and his reserve, a human and noble nature; the characteristic epithets given him that have survived from his friends' lips are the two words "gentle" and "sweet"; though a few ill-natured phrases were flung at him, he escaped with the highest good-fortune the venom that the literary life vents even on its favourites. He was helpful; in his youth he befriended Jonson, and in later years he collaborated with younger men. His comrades of the theatre show him that wholesome loyalty which mixes respect and affection so

that they are indistinguishable. He seems to have had by nature those unconscious, intimate, incommunicable traits that oftenest come only from breeding and make men free of the society where they are. Young Southampton was not only his patron, but his friend; and in that difficult role of poet and patron Shakspeare was proud and happy in his noble friend, and gave the tribute of affectionate compliment in verse and that glory of style that lies in courtly hyberbole, and all that was due from the greatest of poets, but he gave his heart also. Shakspeare accepted the conditions of the literary life with respect to rank and fortune in his day as simply as he met the state of the theatre. It is likely there was no better courtier when he went to court, as it is likely that there was no better buyer when he went to view lands and houses, no better judge of the public taste in plays. He was equal to the business of life on all sides that required worldly ability, and temperamentally as equal to it in the things of affection and comradery, of the heart, of humanity in social intercourse. The patron, the mortgage belong in his life, together with the scores of friends and the innumerable affairs to do; they are naturally there, for he was a man like others who lived the common life of man, earned and ate his bread in it, and to whom this action of life in and about and for himself was a very palpable thing. It is not a life that has

SHAKSPERE

left much record of itself, not diversified by adventure, not the scene of known passions; but the golden silences that lie like autumn mould upon his memory are in harmony with that thought which discovers there a life, dedicated indeed to the creative dream, but yet within the limitations of its own world distinguished by daily labour and daily kindness, not too self-conscious, storing up provision for the future, respect from the world, the affection of friends, the things that should accompany old age — a life well-lived, well-acted, in its earthly lines. Such a life is consistent with the highest genius even in men in whom the sense of life as action is not so supreme as it was in Shakspeare; in him it was born of that genius where everything set with a great tide toward reality.

Action is the core of the drama; it is what gives attractive and arresting power to the word “dramatic,” focuses the attention, makes the eye look and the spirit expect at the fall of those syllables. To Shakspeare, in his youth, immersed and absorbed in the dramatic movement that made a captive servant of him, mind, moods, energy, ambition, hope — that overmastered him with what was to be his fate therein, life was the object of his thoughts, but life primarily as a story. The story of life was there before him in the old plays on the stage, in the books he read, in the tales he thumbed over; at first a

GREAT WRITERS

story of English Kings and Italian lovers, of the convulsions of state, heart-break and the words of clowns, comic confusions, tragic discords, enchanted woodlands. He found the chronicle plays in vogue, fragments of history; and here and there, beginning his art, he re-established a scene, heightened a dialogue, concentrated a passion of anger or pity; it was piecemeal work by which he came to the power at last of defining a plot, a play of his own, an interpretation and representation of the story in a way of his own. The material he used was external, given to him, persons and incidents; he did not invent them, he found them; and his manipulation of them at first was, naturally, mainly in the language, the verbal investiture of person, act, scene, that part of the work which was most flexible, most plastic, readiest for a youthful hand and most tempting for lips that had suddenly unlocked a flood of such poesy, eloquence and passion in speech, colours of nature and the heart, as had never before poured from an English fount. It is this flow of language, vehement or smooth or impassioned, reflecting natural beauty or personal graces, prone to pathos and sentiment, rhetorical, dragging along with it all the affectations of the hour, experimenting with its own powers, intoxicated with its own poetry, exuberant with its own life — it is this marvellously musical, facile, intellectual power of language, this mastery that is not

SHAKSPERE

merely verbal, but is of the essence of expression, poetic not purely dramatic — it is this that in the earlier works plays over the story, atmospheres it, inhabits it, and in its surplus of light, feeling and imagery, in its lyrical effusion, overflows without submerging the dramatic interest, threatens the eminence of the action. From “Love’s Labour’s Lost” to “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” this lyrical obsession mounts prevailing; thereafter it recedes — the tints of the morning, the bloom of spring, the hour of the bloom of life had passed. Shakspeare, loosing the passion of language to the full as never English poet did, had not lost his foothold on the reality of life, on the story, the drama, the action; and, deepening in his dramatic faculty he came, in the end, to that subtile mastery of language which belongs only to the greatest genius, lords of the brief and broken phrase. Four words created light; and something of that same miracle lingers in the power of the poet who is truly divine. The gradual victory of dramatic over purely poetic diction in Shakspeare reflects the victory of life itself, of the action over the illusion of life, in him.

There was a second rivalry with the dramatic instinct in Shakspeare besides this of the lyrical impulse. It lay in the intellectual temptation, the power of the naked thought. What is technically called the sentiment, that is, the wise saying, the axiomatic verse in which the re-

flecting mind is condensed with a purely intellectual value, was an inheritance of the drama from old time; and Shakspeare, particularly in his middle life, was apt at linking such counsels together or in developing them from the dialogue. It is an analogous faculty that he employs in those wit-combats of the characters that are pre-eminently intellectual in tone. The wit of Rosalind and Beatrice is more closely united to the dialogue; but in the passages of advice, from Biron's gentle sermon on love to the sage wisdom of Polonius and Ulysses, and even on to Prospero's great farewell there is a recurring interruption of the action in play after play, due to the emergence of thought in control of the scene; and as Shakspeare's lyricism gives to the plays that atmosphere which isolates them among the works of dramatic genius and sets them apart in an unapproached realm of creative art, so his wisdom gives to them that intellectual dilatation by which they excel all others in majesty of mind. Other dramatists have represented life with equal impressiveness in its being, but none have represented life so conscious of its own significance. Here again, as in his lyrical moment, Shakspeare in his intellectual moment seems to depart from the story, the drama, the action, but he does not really depart, or if he does so it is only to bring back to the drama the offerings of all the Muses. And in a third tributary element of

SHAKSPERE

the drama, in the spectacle, while he uses the embellishment of the scene to the full measure of what his times allowed, he introduces the masque as an adjunct, like a song or a dance, harmonious with the scene but not an essential of the action. These three things, then, diction, sentiment and spectacle, which were the open temptation to woo him from the essential dramatic point of view, the action, he either overcame or successfully subdued them to the enrichment and enlargement of the action; the main drift of his art, the main purpose of his mind were the same, with whatever slackening or bending of the current, toward the story of life pre-eminently, toward character and event, toward reality in its most human form. Beginning with the more intractable material of history, he came to use preferably romantic story in which his imagination was more free in creative power; and in the end, to such a height did this power reach that he seemed to create not only character and event, but also the world in which they had their being; to such a complete victory did his dramatic instinct, prevailing over all other impulses, carry him who always remained at heart a dramatist.

Shakspere was so completely a dramatist, interested in the action of life, that when he took the autobiographical mask in the "Sonnets" he seems transformed into his opposite, into the lyrical poet unlocking his own

heart; here, it has been believed, he told his dearest secrets, his intimacies, the most sweet and bitter disgraces of his days and nights, his springs and autumns; and so inspired is the dramatic action of his mind in this play in the forms of the sonnet, if it be such, that it is only by an effort of detachment, by reflection and judgment, that one sees there only the working of that supreme faculty under the appearances of personality. The secret of the "Sonnets" has been so many times discovered, and escaped in the discovery, that this view, now best supported, may justly have its lease of life in turn, and the physical basis of fact on which the poet's imagination worked — such strands and suggestions of actuality as he used in the romances — may be found in Southampton's personality; but the black lady, the dear, disloyal friend, the rival poet will still wear in their faces, have in their form and moving, an insoluble mystery, because, whatever the drama, they move in a cloud of lyricism, intense with tenderness, sorrow, unavailing cries, that here all seems the form and substance of the soul itself. A dramatist who makes his own soul the scene of the drama, using the forms of personality, must necessarily leave a mysterious work; but in the "Sonnets" what is plain is the drama, what is obscure is only the basis of the drama, whether it be fact or convention, or mingled of both; whatever be the personal element, it

SHAKSPERE

is conceived, handled, developed dramatically, its truth is at bottom dramatic truth.

And if it be difficult to trace Shakspeare's personality with any assured steps in the "Sonnets," how much less is it to be probed in the plays proper! Those attempts that have been made to correlate the bare facts of his history with the sequence of his works, to synchronize his life-moods with the comedies and the tragedies, to make the plays render up the spiritual states of the man in his personal being, are ingenious; but the conditions of production, when Elizabeth might ask any day for a "Merry Wives of Windsor," or some noble family desire a hymeneal spectacle like "A Midsummer Night's Dream," or James be pleased with a Scotch theme, or the public itself, little indulgent to the moods of those who provide entertainment, might have to be recaptured to the play — such conditions are little favourable to "periods" of the private soul. The chronology of the works, too, is not convincing. Did Shakspeare, in whose mind the perspective of life varied no more than the perspective of the heavens in the celestial telescope, think to have all that world of his courtesy to his private fortunes in a son's death, a friend's fall, a mistress's fickle change? Shakspeare was of the objective type of genius, a trite but useful phrase for a very palpable fact. He never mistook his soul for the soul of the universe. He passed, as other

GREAT WRITERS

men, from youth to manhood, and the deepening of his nature in the process, as it was worked out under the control of absorption in creative dramatic art is plainly discerned; he seized life in its action more logically, more ideally, more profoundly; he compassed and penetrated and filled it with omnipresent thought; height and depth, passion and fate and gloom, he laid it bare; he saw it. He passed through the disillusionment; but it was a disillusionment not of the suffering heart, but of the seeing eye; and after the disillusionment came, what comes to all, the lassitude, the indifference, the repose, the relaxed sense of fate, the concession to optimism, the fantastic world; the calm of Shakspeare was the subsidence of life in him, the smoothing of the great wave of passion, the stilling of the tumultuous voices of thought.

Such a history he had, in whatever special forms of personal feeling; it is the normal life of great genius, absorbing imaginatively the passion and thought of life in the world; and from time to time, out of this continuing personal reaction on life in normal growth there would proceed modifying influences, lines of choice in subject, of intellectual direction, of creative mood, passional harmonies blending with the given theme — to such a point temperament would have its will, more or less, with the work according to time and circumstances; but such a

SHAKSPERE

continuing and aging mood attendant on the plays is a far different thing from "periods" determinative of the type of the plays in a sequence which makes them proceed from Shakspeare's personal fortunes as a mortal spirit with changes from cheerfulness to gloom and again to equanimity. Shakspeare was a dramatist by nature as well as by profession, or he became subdued to what he worked in; he was the servant of the public; and, much more, he was fascinated by life in its externality, life as it was in other men, other times, other places; he was insatiate in informing himself of its story in history, in novels and romances, in ancient and modern authors, wherever it was to be found. He was not that egotist who writes himself large and calls that the world; art in him was not self-revealing, it was the revelation of a world that had been from the foundation of being and would continue when his works were buried deeper than any plummet could sound. This objectivity, this self-effacement in art, this interest in the story of life, this absorption in life's movement, in action, is Shakspeare's gift of greatness. It explains his limitations. Spirituality, properly speaking, the celestial immortality of man's nature, is not found in Shakspeare either in character, thought or aspiration. The religious life sleeps in his works; and many a generation will marvel at it. He was interested in life, the action of life; and that is a thing

confined to this world. He is mundane, secular, in a way scientific; he saw the spectacle as it is in time.

The second main consideration bearing on Shakspeare's genius is the fact that the world he saw, dealt with and knew was an aristocratic world. It was given to him first historically, in those chronicles in which his hand learned to mould the human stuff, a kingly world of the Henrys, the Richards and John, with feudal challenge, battle incidents, the life of the council, murders in prisons or on the block, treasons, dethronements, the sorrows of queens, Norfolk, Hotspur and Falconbridge; a life focussed on aristocratic fortunes and pivoted on aristocratic power. To Shakspeare the people was always the mob, and negligible. The sphere of humour, too, in which the vulgar enters, is dependent on the aristocratic sphere from the comedy of the camp-fire and the tavern to Bottom's craftsmen and the court clowns, up to Lear's Fool. Later, the Roman plays gave him the same aristocratic state in an antique form, dictatorial, imperial, with the mob of citizens though more in evidence, more contemptible. The ordered world for him was the world of courtly life; all else, though contiguous or entering in for entertainment or service or in the mass of battle, was essentially subordinated, exteriorized, as environment. The romances, which, after the chronicles, had given him the raw material, reinforced his conception of life

SHAKSPERE

as an aristocratic structure by expanding it socially into a community of gentle-folk, Venetian, Veronan, Paduan, in Arden, Attica, Illyria, or on French or English meadows; a life where everything breathed civility, the sentiment of high breeding in chivalry and courtesy, the cult of phrase, the dress and behaviour, the interests, ambitions, intrigues, recreations, language, manners and customs of an aristocratic ideal. Even in those regions of the imagination, where he reared his own state in its lordliest form, with the effect of an incantation of genius, in the English realm of Lear, the Scotch court of Macbeth, the throne of Denmark, the Venetian principality of Cyprus, the Egypt of Antony, or in the woods of Cymbeline, the country-side of Perdita, the island-kingdom of Prospero, he impressed upon it aristocracy in its most majestic, noble and gentle forms as the seal of its being. Shakspeare's genius is, in fact, the finest flower of the aristocratic ideal of life.

Aristocracy is, in a sense, the state of nature historically developed in society as the survival of the fittest in the selfish struggle for existence. Shakspeare received it as the past of the world, contained in the forms of history and romance, the life that had always been, in which the masses, held in economic slavery under whatever name, furnished that wealth monopolized by the nobles which gave these latter liberty of the higher sphere of life, the

GREAT WRITERS

sphere of intelligence, ambition, art, where they were enfranchised and armed for the possession of the chief goods of life. Aristocracy, so based on the enforced tribute of mankind, naturally develops individuality, the open career for those who are in command of wealth, opportunity, leisure; it spreads the scene for strong natures, highly endowed, superfluous in vital force and selfish desire; it is the breeding place of human greatness of the positive, self-assertive, world-conquering kind. Shakspeare received this aristocratic ideal from the times in which life had been great, from the Greek, Roman, English periods; but he received it also at a peculiarly fortunate moment in the special movement of its historical development; he received it when the coarser, denser forms of military and tyrannic power, of feudalism, monarchy and dogma, were dissolving in the finer, milder, freer modes of rationalism, individuality, culture; he received it at a culminating moment of its excellence — from the Italian Renaissance.

Personality, the essential fruit of aristocracy, the crowning victory of nature in working out her will, came forth from the Italian Renaissance in one of its highest forms, the form of superb personal power. The idea is so native to Italy and has played so great a part in her history that it seems racial — a race-element in her greatness. It was then concentrated in the ideal of the

Renaissance prince, whether as a pattern in Machiavelli, or as an illustration from history in the nobles and leaders of the Italian cities; but stripped to its essentials it is no more than the individual will to live, the dominance of that will, the ideal of conquering the world to oneself, of subduing life, of having one's way, one's will, one's desire, of the assertion of the power to live that is the thirst of great souls. The aristocratic ideal of life in the Italian Renaissance developed in the central line of its advance in history this idea of the dominance of the personal will in life, the prepotency of individuality; and in so doing it freed human faculty, energy and desire in a way and to a degree which gave to Italy its brilliant period of many-sided genius and impelled the human spirit in every civilized country and recaptured the lost provinces of Rome to the dominion of a spiritual civilization the seat of whose power is in the ideals of men. The Renaissance was so great a movement. Though not a material conquest, it was vaster in control than that of Alexander or of the elder antique Rome. Shakspeare took its full impact, lived in it, fed on it, absorbed its passions, its principles, its being, became its spirit in the North, was its transcendent and overwhelming genius in literature, its greatest monument in time. This is Shakspeare's position; he was the flower of the aristocratic ideal of life; he was the crest of the Renaissance; he was the incarnate spirit

of that mighty power of life to live mightily which belongs to the aristocratic ideal as a right of nature and was the passion of the Renaissance in history.

The drama, it must be borne in mind, was always a European art. Shakspeare's universality, which is often made the occasion of so much marvel, is in its origins closely connected with this fact. The early English drama, with its miracle-plays, moralities, school-comedies, Senecan imitations, displayed cosmopolitan traits and originals belonging to a common mental culture and a general artistic condition; and the Elizabethan drama, in its Shaksperian culmination, though locally English, proceeded out of the European mind, its general past, its ideas, principles, moods, its order of life, its accumulation of sentiment and romance, its forms of imagination; and in this Shakspeare from an early point in his career was more deeply imbued than any of his contemporaries. What, then, constituted the European mind, its intellectual memory and moral passion, its conception and ideal of life, its poetic culture and means of art, was more variously, richly and profoundly present and active in him than in any other writer. He may never have been out of England; but he was the most European author then living. It is not an accident that on his stage locality ceases to exist. Italy has her immortality in the drama more in Shakspeare than in her own literature.

SHAKSPERE

“Hamlet” is the chief literary monument of Denmark. This does not happen by the caprice of an individual, but marks that quality in Shakspeare by virtue of which he is the genius of Europe. The human spirit, from time to time, detaches from the world of known geography a country of its own lying apart, a land for itself; such was Arcadia, in which Sidney and others wandered; such was the region of chivalry where Spenser and others traversed the romantic scene; and such was the realm of Shakspeare’s stage, the magic circle where none dared tread but he. It was a world abstracted from the great scene of life in Europe as it then lay before the thoughts of men, in its breadth out of the historic past, in its variety of living energy, its mediæval and classic garniture, its Renaissance luminousness, space, vivacity; it was this scene of the European consciousness of what life had been and was, idealized and generalized, and made to issue in poetry with the power and brilliancy of a new creation, the realm of Shakspeare’s art. The aristocratic ideal of life is its organic principle and determines the quality of the scene, the nature of the event, the impulse of the characters; all the flowering of phrase and fancy, of sentiment and passion, all the adornment of taste in whatever form, all that constitutes mood, temperament and atmosphere, is representative of the European fashion of courtliness, scholarship, art, the reverie and

GREAT WRITERS

dream that belong to the Renaissance characteristically, its pastoral, dramatic, rhetorical modes, its vari-coloured romanticism; but, most cardinal of all, what is the mainspring of its life, is the human force loosed in it, that prepotency of the individual, that dominance of the personal will, which was the master-spirit of the Renaissance everywhere and finds in Shakspeare's world the place of its great career. This is not a local, a national, an English thing; it is a world-idea, and the imagination of Shakspeare, mastered by its inspiration found any country a fit stage for it in that environment of an ideal courtly life which was also not local or provincial, but a great world-scene. Shakspeare's universality in matter goes back to the fact that he was never anything else but cosmopolitan, in the nature of his knowledge, the ideality of his art, the sources, compass and illustrative power of his dramatic work. What is most contemporary, realistic and locally English in this work is on its fringes; in its beginnings and interludes, subordinate; in proportion as the work becomes great, profound, comprehensive, it possesses more purely the European character, it develops ideal freedom, it belongs not to Italy or Denmark or England, but to the genius of Europe.

The dawn of the Renaissance spirit, incarnating itself in English dramatic poetry, was in Marlowe, who was

SHAKSPERE

perhaps in his own passion of life more at one with the heart of the Renaissance than was Shakspeare, but he was less nobly, less perfectly, less splendidly, at one with it in its manifold fulness of expression. Marlowe first put on the stage the career of great passions, characters of immeasurable ambition and unquenchable thirst; but in "Tamerlane," "The Jew of Malta" and "Faustus," the theme is not sufficiently correlated with the real play of fact and force in human affairs, it is seized with too much intellectual abstraction and presented too spectacularly and fragmentarily in the scenes; some experimenting with the modifying power of history over imagination and invention was needed before it could find its dramatic limits and free itself from fantasy, enthusiasm and exaggeration in artistic expression. Shakspeare followed Marlowe in turning to English history for the material of his art. The idea of tragedy was, indeed, already defined for him in the European tradition as a thing of the fall of princes, of royal misfortune and the vicissitude of splendid fates; and in this way Shakspeare's tragic course was charted out for him beforehand; but in working out dramatically the lots of the English kings he also kept a close hold on the idea of a life-force in personality determining temperament, character and the issues of the action. What in Marlowe was extravagantly set forth as the fixed idea in his characters, bear-

ing almost the impress of madness, remains in Shakspeare, but subdued to the requirements of the environment and of human nature, to probability. "Richard II" is a pathetic instance of the fall of a prince, but the story is linked with that infatuation of the idea of divine right which is the dominant idea of Richard, absorbs the eloquence, grace and chivalry of his nature and contains his fate. In "Richard III," the prepotency of the selfish force develops its bloody way with a power to take possession of the king's soul that recalls the self-maddening tyranny of the Roman emperors, till he becomes the fiend, the enemy of society and of the state itself, whose fall clears the air like a departing thunderstorm. Romeo exhibits the mastering of passion in the youthful soul; love in him is ecstasy. The dominance of the personal will, possessed by an idea inciting it, asserting itself with unbridled desire, naturally leads to madness, and in Shakspeare's great characters of this sort mania is never far off; in Macbeth there is the capital instance of the blending of the borders between reason and unreason, and, as is Shakspeare's way, this elemental trait in the play permeates it, objectified in the witches, reduplicated in Lady Macbeth, but concentrated in the vivid mental action, the bodily starts and stares, the repeated challenge of fate, in Macbeth's shaking but never quite dethroned "state of man." "Timon" is a

SHAKSPERE

lesser illustration. "Hamlet" and "Lear" thrust this part of life into the foreground; and in "Othello," the near neighbourhood of the excess of life to madness, of the noble nature to ruin through its own power to live, to be possessed by a passion, an idea, a sorrow, is the ground of its tragic scene. The personal will is necessarily anti-social, and hence opens in its career the whole field of tragic conflict in endless ways; the drama is its natural scope in art, and there it is the most potent power to conjure with; it is, by far, the most interesting thing in the whole of that action of life which Shakspeare contemplated so absorbingly. The Renaissance spirit concentrated and intensified the sense of it, carried it to the extreme, made an ideal of it, in history; Shakspeare took it over into the sphere of imagination and then gave such examples of it in the transcendent forms of art that his characters became, each in its kind, the supreme models of what is possible to human nature and faculty in personal force, the types of man.

The fulness of life in all its forms, which makes the plays great, has as its underlying basis this life-force, the affirmation of life, in its energies, its desires, its revelations, in the conscious spectacle of being, and with the more brilliancy because of the transcendent idealization to which the scene of life here has been subjected. All Shakspeare's male characters are self-seekers, in a true

GREAT WRITERS

sense; the exceptions, Kent, a feudal type, and Horatio, a modern form of the Kent temperament, are also men of strength. Though with the visitation of thought, melancholy, peculiar misfortune on the scene, there is occasionally the sense of a withdrawal from life, in Hamlet, Antonio, Hermione, it is rather a forced and regretful retirement than a true withdrawal; the denial of life is truly present in Shakspeare only as an unshaped suggestion. The age was one of action, of faith in life, and the ideals it projected were those of the positive, achieving, realizing kind; and in Shakspeare the life-force moved in his world of art with the fruitfulness, the teeming variety, the creative overflow into being that it has in nature. Men recognize and remember this life-force in him by the immortal figures of the plays, Romeo, Hamlet, Lear, the score or more that have entered into the world's memory enduringly, eternal realities, with ideal fascination, either for their beauty or their intimacy with men's bosoms or their awe in fate or some other mode of consanguinity with man that is Shakspeare's seal upon them; these figures best illustrate that power of life and will to live, in high personal forms, showing the far reach, the majesty, the pity and terror of the forces of life in the soul in their energy accomplishing the utmost possible to man unfolding his nature in the vicissitudes of fortune; but the whole Shaks-

SHAKSPERE

perian world, no less than these, in its various planes of character, incident and plot, is the outcome and realization in art of this same life-force more widely diffused in humanity of every kind and sort. That infinite variety that so distinguishes the plays, such that each seems a fresh revelation of a new world, so embracing that they seem in their wholeness to leave no lot in life unexpressed, no mortal joy or sorrow unrecorded in its own cry, no thought almost untold,—that scene of life from the tavern-companions of Falstaff and the craftsmen of Athens up to the solitude of Cæsar in power, the solitude of Lear in grief, the solitude of Prospero in wisdom,—all this proceeds from the life-force manifesting itself with the multiplicity and abundance of humanity. Shakspeare engaged his mind with the movement of life in its wholeness; he let the life-force pour through him, from clown and fool and trull up to the highest incarnations of the will in passion, wisdom, sorrow, the types of man; and this seen in imagination is the Shaksperian world. He was not an observer, bringing back word from this or that tract of life or group of mortals or peculiarity of fortune; he was a creator—his world is always whole, as entire and perfect in the Indian boy of Titania as in the Rome of Cæsar. The spirit of the Renaissance, insatiable for life, whispered to him this secret; but in the act and passion of creation he exceeded

the Renaissance and took his station with those mightiest few who are not for an age, but for all time.

The courtly sphere, the aristocratic ideal, the culmination of life in the career of great passions led up to that triumph of life which is the spectacle the Shaksperian world presents with inexhaustible profusion, splendour and vitality; but this world, though an emanation of the spirit of the Renaissance and its climax in literature, was itself sphered in a larger conception universal in the tragic art; it lies, like the antique drama, in fatality, in the mystery and under the sway of an infinity that envelops the life-force round about more profoundly and densely than the dark ether envelops the forces and imagery of nature. The prepotency of individuality, the dominance of the personal will are the great forms of life; but the power to live, however supreme in its manifestation, is a wrestling with the unseen angel of life; and to Shaksperc in the long and brooding absorption of his contemplation of the action of life in mortality, what finally emerges from the strife as the master-spirit there is the dominance of fate against which the life-force is shattered. It is commonly said that fate in the antique drama is external and operates from without as destiny, and that in the modern drama it is internal and operates from within as character; the distinction brings out the larger scope of personality and its greater

SHAKSPERE

importance in the romantic drama of Shakspere; but in either case the fatality resides in the action, in the play of the forces determining the tragic catastrophe, in that which is essentially beyond and outside of the sphere of the personal will and operates free from its control, against its desire and to effect its ruin. The error, the weakness, the cause that initiates the play of fate may be of different degrees of ignorance or consciousness, of generosity or criminality, of responsibility or irresponsibility; but, once loosed in whatever way, fate in the end rules the issue. In what is known as Shakspere's period of tragic gloom, that is, in the plays of his manhood's maturity, in which his creative genius works with its most profound power in realizing the states of the soul, the characteristic trait is the gradual emergence in his art of the sense of fate in the world, its accumulation in his mind, its possession of his genius which then gave forth those dramas on which his fame as a master of the knowledge of life most rests and in which fate controls the scene of life in the wreck of fortune, the riving of the soul within, the catastrophe where tragic death loading the stage impresses the mind less as the penalty than as a release of the sufferer from the power of life to torture and betray, a dismissal of the soul to the peace where life is not. To Macbeth, Othello, Lear and also to Hamlet, death is welcome; and to the spectator

GREAT WRITERS

also their death brings relief, calm, peace. Shakspeare, in these days pre-eminently saw fate as that against which personality is shattered, not merely dramatically by a star-crossed fortune as in *Romeo*, with the pathos of the death of youth, beauty and passion, but more essentially as by a law inherent in the greatness of the life-force itself to destroy it; for these are not special but typical instances of the action of life — slight changes of circumstances might have altered the fortunes of *Romeo*, but no change could ever have altered the fate of *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Lear*, *Hamlet*. In these four Shakspeare sets personality against fate, front to front, and the story is felt to be a universal chapter of life, of the implication of the human spirit in that vicissitude of nature and fortune which has in every tongue borne the same name and that is stronger than life.

The realization that such is the nature of human life was attended in Shakspeare's mind by a storm and stress that is read not only in the great dramas, but also in the cynical acquaintance with humanity shown in "*All's Well that Ends Well*," and in the savage temper toward its baseness displayed in "*Troilus and Cressida*." The concentrated, intense, ideal realization of the tragedy of existence, of humanity victimized in its forms of noblest nature or of most superb power, though most brilliant in the four great tragedies, is not confined

SHAKSPERE

to them; it extends and spreads into many others in different planes of character, mood and thought. The action of life takes on that quality of impenetrable mystery which the face of life has always worn, in every literature, in the highest works of imagination. Mystery is an increasing element in Shakspeare's dramas from the first, continuing, growing in depth, growing also in intangibility; poetically, it is etherealized in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" full of the idea of illusion in art as the wood is of moonlight; reflectively, it is precipitated in Hamlet's thought; and, at the end, as the illusion of life it fills "The Tempest;" but the finer and most secret form of mystery in Shakspeare is not poetical or intellectual or metaphysical, but springs from the action itself and is dramatic. It is in Macbeth's superstitious interrogation of the witches, in Hamlet's questioning of the soul in his soliloquy, in those half-lines of tragic climax where life grows silent before the presence of fate; it is in Othello's mind-dazed question:

*"Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body," —*

the mystery of the fates of man; it is in Lear's invocation of the elements:

"I never gave you kingdom, called you children," —
dismissing them from the moral world as if they alone

were free where all was guiltiness in the worse storm of life beating on his white, old head. It is in such passages as these, where Shakspeare's dramatic faculty is at its lightning-stroke that the inner secrecy of the mystery is lighted up, shown but not revealed, in the depth of consciousness. Reason has no solvent for it, justice does not measure with it, mercy is unknown to it. The attempt to make fate ethical in Shakspeare, to identify it with moral law in the universe, however it be made, fails; it was not as righteousness that he saw life; he saw it with the simplicity of his genius, as a dramatic struggle, and, emerging thence, the dominance of fate shattering life mysteriously, beyond the intelligible grasp of man's reason or the moral sense. He saw, in other words, above all else, the dramatic mystery of life.

Shakspeare was thus, through and through, a dramatist; and he was the dramatist in whom the old tradition of the art, even from Æschylus, as a representative of the courtly life and a tale of the fall of princes, culminated. The idea of humanity, in the modern democratic sense, was never in his brain; the types of man that he created were, in their greatness, those of the aristocratic life; and the tragedy he set forth was not that of the spirit of life, the modern world-pain, but of the careers of individuals highly endowed by nature or fortune in a world which seemed to exist to be the theatre

SHAKSPERE

of their will, ambition, passion; he was the dramatist of a class-society. The aristocratic ideal of society and of action in it, however, is the will of nature, and still prevails in every state; and it makes a universal appeal to men. The ground of this appeal is little affected by the absence in Shakspeare of dramatic sympathy; for the scene of life which he does present includes all classes; human nature is common and constant, and the career of life in fortune, ambition, passion is now the same that he depicted; the Shaksperian world, however modern conditions may be changed, is still life as it is known to the thoughts of men. The dramatic mystery is that which is closest to mankind in daily experience, the mystery of what is done, of what happens; the poetic, intellectual, metaphysical modes of mystery exist for the few, but the mystery of the event itself is for all, and it is seized by them in Shakspeare's way as not a thing of reason or ethics, but as a fact impenetrable, leaving the soul according to its degree affected by the scene. This is the normal human attitude toward calamity, toward tragedy, of any kind; its force expends itself not in explanation, but in experience. The sense of life as action, too, and the ideal of it as lying in the prepotency of individuality, and the dominance of the personal will is natural to all men, and the thing dearest to their bosoms as their thought and desire of life; the power to live,— to loose

GREAT WRITERS

the energies of the soul in achievement, enjoyment, experience, to affirm life in its fulness, variety, richness, intensely, extremely insatiably, to the utmost of the force that is in one — this is the impulse to self-expression, to self-realization, that drives men in their ambitions and passions of whatever nature, the action and movement of life in the world; and in this world as it lies outspread in the knowledge and thoughts of men brilliant personal force most attracts admiration, confers fame and secures imitation, oftenest without regard to moral quality. Force is the idol of life that is hardest to combat in civilizing man. In the Shaksperian world the affirmation of life in general is as broadly various as in the world of nature, and in individual types it reaches a height of beauty, power and majesty that is unrivalled in nature because seen through the ideality of art, and these types have a history and a revelation of their being such as is only possible in imagination; men, consequently, passing into this world as they read or behold the plays find there that enlargement of life and its career, that intensification and revelation of it, which, though denied to their experience, truly endows them with the greatness of life, gives them understanding of the soul and the faculties lodged in it, the heights and depths of its passion, the reaches of its thoughts, the shadows of fatality amid which it moves under the stars. The universal appeal of

SHAKSPERE

Shakspere lies in the power with which he has seized life in its intense forms, its richest efflorescence, its magical fantasy, its fascination and horror, its vulgar generality, its high types, its manias and humours, the whole of life, and given it back to men as an increase of their own power to live, a world in which they come to true consciousness of themselves. Life is what men desire; Shakspere gives them life, according to their own ideal, the triumph of life, yet life which at its height is tragic and shocks them with that mystery of the actual which is the profoundest reality.

The secret of life solves the riddle of Shakspere, whose greatness has no other mystery than the mystery of the greatness of life. He is the spirit of life made manifest in its own dramatic motion, imprisoned, embodied and unveiled in art. Here are the fates of men, grotesque, heroic, terrible, or stately in prosperity with the olive crown and the sheaf of Ceres, almost as many in number as the lots set forth to be chosen by the souls at birth. It is an earthly life limited to the mortal scene; no illumination falls on it from heaven, no divinity inhabits its sphere. It is essentially Pagan in its ideal, its art and its philosophy. It is the supreme work of man's hand so rendering life in its aspects of mortality. If one were to mould in sculpture the face of life, it would be, one thinks, that over which every joy and sorrow, every

GREAT WRITERS

thought seems to have moved — the infinite of human expression — leaving its trace in the living flesh, — the face of Shakspeare. That would be, could it be won back from time, the ideal face of life, the Sphinx of our existence.

THE END

COLONIAL BOOK SERVICE

45 FOURTH AVE.

New York City 3, GRamercy 5-8354

We Hunt Out-of-Print Books

Date Due

OCT 14 58		MAY 3 1984
JAN 3 1964		MAR 10 1986
DEC 26 1963 4		NOV 24 1986
APR 27 1964		
MAR 13 1965		NOV 22 1989
APR 12 1965		NOV 22 1989 B
	RR	
MAR 8 1969		
MAR 11 1969 5		
NOV 5 1973		
NOV 8 1973 9		
OCT 1 1974		
OCT 7 1974 4		
MAR 10 1976		
MAR 18 1976 6		
DEC 1 1976		
FEB 5 1977 4		

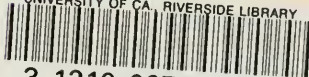
Library Bureau Cat. No. 1137

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



AA 001 284 907 1

UNIVERSITY OF CA. RIVERSIDE LIBRARY



3 1210 00741 7932

